Delia Clow.

# The Unknown Quantity

By ETHEL M. DELL

AUTHOR OF
"The Bars of Iron," "The Keeper of the Door," "The Knave of Diamonds," "The Obstacle Race," "The Odds and Other Stories," "Passerby and Other Stories," "The Rocks of Valpre," "Rosa Mundi and Other Stories," "Tetherstones," "The Way of an Eagle," "Desire of His Life and Other Stories," etc.

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By Ethel M. Dell

The Way of an Eagle
The Knave of Diamonds
The Rocks of Valpré
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The Hundredth Chance
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The Lamp in the Desert
The Tidal Wave
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The Swindler, and Other Stories
The Safety Curtain, and Other Stories
The Odds, and Other Stories
The Passerby, and Other Stories
A Man Under Authority
The Black Knight
The House of Happiness, and Other Stories

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I Dedicate This Book

TO NORAH

IN MOST LOVING REMEMBRANCE
OF ALL SHE HAS GIVEN ME

When the world was new and the early sun
First shone upon sea and land,
When nothing had died and nothing had failed
Of all that the Lord had planned;
The Lord looked down on His handiwork,
On the beasts and the birds and the trees,
And He smiled as He said, "Behold, I will make
A greater thing than these."

So He fashioned man, and He gave him life
And power for his daily task,
But, "For aught that thou needest more," He said,
"Thou shalt turn unto Me and ask."
And one more thing He put in the world,
The greatest of all to be,
And He hid it deep in the soul of man,—
The Unknown Quantity.

For He knew that the world would grow old and tired,
And that man could not do his part
Unless he possessed that hidden strength
To comfort his failing heart;—
The will to pray and the power to play
That last and highest card,
So that, "What he asks shall be done," said the Lord,
"Because he has prayed so hard."

And still the Lord of Hosts looks down
On a world grown old with care,
And still He puts in the hearts of men
That unknown gift of prayer.
And to those who pray with all their strength,
Which is all that the best can do,
His promise stands as It always stood:—
"Behold, I make all things new."

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# The Unknown Quantity

# The Unknown Quantity

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### LADY VARLEIGH THE INVINCIBLE

"My dear," said Lady Varleigh impressively, "take my advice—it is founded upon considerable experience—don't leave the matter too long! There's just as much fun to be had after marriage as before it. Now if I had married young, it would have been a very different story. Whereas I have had to divorce two husbands in ten years—not because it's the fashion, but simply because I was too bored to put up with them." She sighed. "There's nothing so dreadful as boredom, dear. It's worse than temperance—much; by which most inappropriate term I refer to total abstinence. Which reminds me, darling, I've promised to open an awful debate this evening down at the Institute on—what do you think? —how to keep our men-folk out of the public-house, and I'm sure I haven't the vaguest idea what to suggest unless all the feminine portion go too; that might do it, poor dears! And dear, good Sir Philip will be in the chair —think of it! It goes to my heart to shock him, but what

can one do? Yes, you may laugh, Jeannette. But when you are married to a county magnate, you'll know what it means."

"Dear Lady Varleigh," said Jeannette, "what ever made you marry him?"

Lady Varleigh uttered a deep and very humorous chuckle. "What ever made him marry me, would be more to the point, my dear. I am quite the ugliest woman he has ever seen. I refused him at least five times before I finally took the plunge, and most people will, I think, admit that I'm a woman of my word as a rule. Yes, I refused him, Jeannette,—mainly because he had a dreadful cough at the time that was just like a Klaxon, and I feared it was chronic. It's gone now; at least he only does it when I say the wrong thing, and I find it so helpful that I've learnt to bear with it."

"How dare he?" said Jeannette.

"Oh, he isn't a bit afraid of me," said Lady Varleigh. "Really, he stands up to me like a man, and I can't help admiring him for it sometimes, poor ridiculous creature. For he actually thinks that he makes an impression, and I haven't the heart to undeceive him. You see, he's so different from the others,—so simple, Jeannette. That's why he never bores me. Why, a good row with Sir Philip is worth a dozen plays. I can work him up to fever pitch without any trouble at all. It's so amusing."

She laughed again with a comfortable shaking of her broad shoulders, and a general screwing up of her large features that was somehow irresistibly comic.

The girl who sat opposite to her was of a very different mould, small, upright, dainty, with a firefly quickness about her every movement that made her oddly arresting. Her brows were straight and thin, and her grey eyes almost hawk-like in their brightness. They had the peculiarity of a greater length in the lower lashes than in the

upper—a characteristic which Lady Varleigh was wont to describe as "dangerous," and it certainly gave a strange effect to her face, imparting a mysterious, almost secretive look. Her nose was short and thin, her mouth also, like her brows, quite straight, slightly compressed in repose, but very mobile when she spoke or smiled. Her teeth were short and square and regular, her chin short also, but too pointed for beauty. It was a striking face, curiously emphatic; there were some who called it haunting, even tragic, though none ever connected tragedy with Jeannette Wyngold in those days. She was the queen of her little empire, and her worshippers were many. Perhaps it was not strange that there should be a hint of haughtiness in the delicate curve of her neck, the slender straightness of her carriage. For her friend Lady Varleigh was the only person who ever presumed to criticize her, and of her it was proverbial that she never stood in awe of anyone. But then Lady Varleigh's criticisms were not of a destructive order, and her love for the girl was sufficient to make her a privileged person. Jeannette never resented the plainest speaking from her, in fact she would not have welcomed anything else. It interested her to listen to her advice, even though she had no intention of going any way but her own.

"I wish I had known you when you were my age," she suddenly said. "I believe—I can't help believing—that we should have been rather alike."

Lady Varleigh laughed at the bare idea—her jolly carefree laugh. "Not in the least, dear. Not the faintest degree in the world. I've been an ugly woman all my life, remember, and I've had to fight for my place. You'd have hated me as a girl, and I should have hated you. We should have been the deadliest of enemies. In fact I don't believe our little world would have been big enough to hold us."

"How absurd!" said Jeannette, but her delicate face coloured faintly as she said it, as though she sensed a challenge.

"Quite absurd!" very sensibly agreed Lady Varleigh. "Because luckily impossible. And so we shall neither of us meet our match, and shall continue to hold our own in our separate spheres as long as we remain in them."

"Have you always held your own?" said Jeannette. "But of course you have, dear Lady Varleigh the Invincible!"

"So far as that goes," said Lady Varleigh, "I have never yet met a woman I couldn't beat, and only one man."

Jeannette's eyes gleamed a little. "Sir Philip?" she asked.

Lady Varleigh's stout shoulders shook again. "My dear child! Sir Philip! Now don't make me laugh or I know I shall begin to wheeze! Sir Philip! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" She wiped her eyes. "Another cup of tea, my Jeannette! No? Then shall we go into the garden?"

She got up, still laughing, and stretched a hand to her companion which Jeannette sprang to take.

"Shall I get you a wrap?" she asked.

"No—no! I shan't hurt. You dart about like a swallow, child. What it is to be young! Make the most of it!"

"Don't you think I do?" said Jeannette.

The older woman paused on the threshold of the French window, and her face, with its swarthy, strong features was suddenly serious.

"You ought to marry, darling," she said.

"But why?" protested Jeannette. "There's plenty of time."

"How do you know?" said Lady Varleigh.

She rested her hands on the girl's slight shoulders, and her black eyes looked piercingly into the grey ones.

"Haven't you met him yet, Jeannette?" she said.

"No," said Jeannette briefly.

"And you twenty-one to-morrow!" said Lady Varleigh.

"I can't help that," said Jeannette.

"And they say that you have had more proposals in the last two years than any other girl in the county."

"That's natural, I suppose," said Jeannette, with a little laugh that was not without a hint of cynicism.

"My dear," said Lady Varleigh, "no one would propose to you without loving you. No one would dare."

"Oh, I daresay they love me," said Jeannette. "But—well, I suppose I'm too well off as I am. I've never yet met any man to compare with my father."

"So sure of that?" said Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette made a little gesture of weariness. "He is the only man in the world who really knows—and loves me."

"I wonder," said Lady Varleigh.

"I am sure of that," said Jeannette. "All the rest, they see a girl, good-looking, tremendously popular, stupendously wealthy, clever, smart, dashing and they are dazzled and fall in love. I often wonder—" she broke off—"no, I don't really. I know as soon as I begin."

Lady Varleigh nodded. "Yes. I had the advantage there, I admit. I was never troubled with those sorts of misgivings. It was always me they wanted and I knew it. Not my wealth,—I hadn't any. Not my looks,—they were and still are a minus quantity. Not my cleverness,—I had the sense to hide that. And my accomplishments were never of the dazzling order. But all these drawbacks, my dear, are merely superficial. When

you meet the man you can love, they won't count at all. Life is like that,—multitudes upon multitudes of little obstacles. But when the great passion comes, it sweeps them all away. He won't care whether you are a princess or a beggar-maid. That's love, my dear. It hews a way through everything."

"Does it?" said Jeannette. "But—" her look was doubtful—"how is one to know?"

"I love your eyes," said Lady Varleigh, with apparent inconsequence. "They are so delightfully secret. Someone will love you for that alone some day. You will draw him like a magnet. And he will follow you—pursue you—capture you—and find his treasure in your heart."

"I'm not quite sure that I've got a heart for that sort of thing," said Jeannette, faintly frowning.

Lady Varleigh's jolly laugh caught her up. "Hark to the cynic! Shall I tell you what is the matter with that heart of yours, my child. It has too many to choose from. You have become critical—at your age! You are handicapping yourself, Jeannette. Why, at this rate you will never get married at all!"

"Does it matter?" said the girl. "I've got practically all the things that most women marry for, without."

"What do you know of life?" said Lady Varleigh.

"All I want to know," said Jeannette with quick decision.

"You don't yet know the very first rudiments," the elder woman said. "What about children, Jeannette? Do you love children?"

"Well enough," said Jeannette in her brief way. "I shouldn't marry for that."

"No," said Lady Varleigh. "I am glad of that. Yet, think, darling, what the joy of motherhood must be!"

Jeannette stirred restlessly. "I can be happy without it," she said.

Lady Varleigh sighed. "It never came to me. My life would have been a different story if it had. Jeannette, I shouldn't like you to have a life like mine."

Jeannette's straight brows went up. "But you have been married three times!" she said.

Lady Varleigh's smile succeeded her sigh. "I know. And if I had been given children, it would have been but once. Bless me, dear, you don't suppose I was in love with the creatures, do you? No—no! It was just the dread of loneliness—the want of someone to bicker at—nothing else."

"Oh!" said Jeannette. "Then why preach to me of love?"

"Because you are different." The eyes that looked into hers softened magically. "You are a girl, and you have the world at your feet. It won't always be so, dear, and I want you to seize and hold while you can. You are not in love now, but there must be some one of the many who want you that you could love. The spring-time will pass, Jeannette, the summer too. And then will come the dark days and the long cold nights. And you will sit alone and think of the chances you threw away. And none of these things that you think worth having now will count with you then. You will only know the ache of loneliness and the emptiness of a world that has forgotten you. All the old lovers will be married, and living in their own homes with their children around them. They will never think of you, Jeannette, unless with a passing word of pity or perhaps a jest at your expense!"

"Let them!" said Jeannette, with a quick gleam in her eyes.

"No; listen, child! That isn't all. Among them may be the very one who might have waked the music in your

heart if you had suffered him to try. He will think of you more often, dear. You will be the lost dream of his life. He will be filling himself with the husks while you starve alone in your empty home."

"What a pathetic picture!" laughed Jeannette. "Somehow I don't think it will come true. There will always be something better to do than to sit by the fire alone."

"That is true," said Lady Varleigh. "You may have to earn your own living by that time. It's a topsy-turvy world, dear, and fortunes change. Nothing is certain nowadays. That's another reason for not leaving it too long. Mate in the mating season, Jeannette, and the chances are you will be happy!"

She took the girl's arm with the words and led her out upon the sunny terrace that stretched along the southern front of the old house. The warm autumn sunshine lay in a golden haze upon the green uplands of Varleigh Park where the rabbits dodged in and out of their burrows with perky *insouciance,* and the rooks swarmed noisily in the belt of elm-trees that crowned the rise.

"Yes. It's better than Starfields," said Jeannette. "I should want to live for ever if I owned a place like this."

"One has got to if one can," said Lady Varleigh practically. "Living is difficult enough, goodness knows, in these hard times; but as to dying—well, nobody can afford to nowadays. They've turned it into a luxury, beyond the reach of all but the very poor—who have everything."

"I wonder what it feels like to be very poor," mused Jeannette. "I sometimes think money is rather wasted on me. I should so love to scheme and contrive."

"Wait till you have to do it, my dear!" Lady Varleigh spoke with unwonted grimness. "It hasn't many charms, I assure you."

"Oh, I don't mean what you mean," protested Jeannette. "I should cast away all pretence at gentility. I wouldn't be hampered with that sort of thing."

"Then you would lose caste," said Lady Varleigh. "Yes, you may smile and think you know best, you little minx! But caste is a very precious thing. It's a safeguard against evils altogether outside your experience. Oh, you wouldn't like it, Jeannette. Marry, child, marry, and put these foolish ideas away!"

Jeannette began to laugh. "Why, you look quite scared. And if I marry—as you suggest—who is to say it will be a success?"

"It's so much more likely to be a success," Lady Varleigh assured her. "One gets fastidious, exacting, as one grows older. Oh, believe me, Jeannette, it's better to marry while you are young. You can hold your own then. Afterwards—afterwards—" she stopped and pressed Jeannette's arm hard for a moment or two; then: "Be warned by me, dear!" she said, in a low voice.

Jeannette looked at her, and her young face had an odd expression as of admiration mingled with compassion. "Dear Lady Varleigh the Invincible!" she said.

"Thank you, dear," said Lady Varleigh, with a brisk return to her customary commonsense. "And now, the question is, which of the many is it to be?"

## CHAPTER II

### THE DECISION

"WHICH of the many?" said Jeannette and laughed. "I tell you, Lady Varleigh, there isn't one—no, not one—that I would leave my father to spend a single day with!"

"Now! Now!" said Lady Varleigh. "I won't listen to that. We'll pretend you're just an ordinary girl for the occasion, with an ordinary father—yes, my dear, just the ordinary selfish type of mankind; they all are, you know, whether you idolize them or not. And—instead of being a blasé little cynic—you are going to try and feel like a young, wholesome girl who hasn't got all she wants for the lifting of a finger. You have never figured in the papers as the beautiful Miss Wyngold—daughter of the richest banker in the kingdom. You have never been presented at Court. A hunt-ball in the winter and a tennis-tournament every summer are the extent of your gaieties. You possess two frocks for a whole season, and you wear them without variation. Your shoes have to last for a year at least."

"I shouldn't like that," said Jeannette.

"No, dear. But how you would revel in the new ones when they came! Then, as to looks, you are not really beautiful of course. Nobody thinks so. Striking-looking is your chief asset. You have that secret look which

makes men wonder. I don't think the fools would bother about you. But the knaves would follow you in a string."

"That's something," said Jeannette.

"It is, dear,—rather a dangerous something. If you weren't so sheltered and hedged about by wealth I should be afraid for you. Never mind! We're just pretending. But it is just that look of the unknown quantity about you that makes for uncertainty. You are an unknown quantity. I don't suppose even you could plumb your own depths if you tried."

"I know what I like and what I don't like," said Jeannette.

"Yes, dear. And that's useful, I admit. It's more than most of us can say, and simplifies matters very much. Well then, we will go through the list of those who would certainly love you for yourself and whom you therefore ought to be able to love in return. First and foremost, of course there is young Wetherby—an estimable young man, dear,—faithful as a dog, and not a fool either. I have never thought that you properly appreciated him. And yet——"

"Please, Lady Varleigh—" Jeannette interrupted with great decision—"Buck Wetherby may be everything that is charming, but he is nowhere on the list and never could be."

"You don't like him?" said Lady Varleigh.

"I detest him," said Jeannette.

"That sometimes makes a good foundation." Lady Varleigh spoke musingly. "Have you never thought to yourself, dear,——"

"Often, often!" Jeannette interrupted again impulsively. "You say he isn't a fool. I say he is—to imagine for a moment—one single moment—that any woman would look at him twice if there were anyone else within a hundred miles to look at."

"I think you are a little hard on him," protested Lady Varleigh.

"Not in the least," said Jeannette firmly. "I can get on with Skittles and Bandy any day. But Buck—not for five minutes."

"Curious!" mused Lady Varleigh. "And yet he is the one of the whole crowd whom I should point to as incapable of wanting you for anything but yourself."

"Pshaw!" said Jeannette. Her face was flushed with the emphasis of her words. "If he were the only man in the world, I wouldn't have him."

"He is a gentleman," said Lady Varleigh.

"Oh yes, I know. But so stuffy—so full of virtue—such a hopeless prig. Imagine him at fifty! No, don't! It's too dreadful to contemplate. He is the dullest type of young man I have ever come across. I could never—possibly—marry him."

"Ah, well! You might do worse," said Lady Varleigh. "As Punch once very aptly remarked, 'The good ones always are dull.' However, we will pass on. I suppose neither Skittles nor Bandy is large enough fry to attract your majesty?"

"I shouldn't mind Skittles if he were ten years older," said Jeannette.

"Never marry a man you don't mind!" said Lady Varleigh. "That is simply asking for trouble—a house built on the sand. Besides, Skittles wouldn't want you without the fine feathers. Bandy would. But then—Bandy is Bandy, isn't he?"

Jeannette's lips curved a little. "I rather like Bandy," she said.

"Worse and worse!" declared Lady Varleigh. "You would hate him more desperately than Buck before the honeymoon was over."

"Impossible!" said Jeannette.

"Yes, dear, you would. Buck would assert himself and win your respect at least. Bandy wouldn't. Bandy would sulk and leave you alone."

"Very well. Dismiss them all!" said Jeannette. "I really haven't any use for any of them except Skittles who dances so divinely that I believe I should accept him if we went on long enough."

"Don't be silly!" said Lady Varleigh. "Remember, it's easier to dance into matrimony than to dance out again. Well, that disposes of the Wetherbys, doesn't it? This process of elimination is quite helpful. Now what about the Honourable Jack?"

"Captain Briar!" Jeannette made a face. "He's quite a good sportsman, of course," she added more kindly. "I daresay we shouldn't quarrel. But just think of his mother! No! I don't think I could."

"I couldn't either," agreed Lady Varleigh. "She is the sort of person who would live for ever too. Well, the next! There is your neighbour, Major Sterne. What of him?"

"The Dough-nut!" said Jeannette. "Do you think he would want me without the money-bags?"

"I think he is greatly attracted by you," said Lady Varleigh. "But of course he isn't frightfully rich, poor dear. And he is rather wedded to his hens. I suppose he has never asked you, Jeannette?"

"No," said Jeannette. "But he has given me to understand more than once that a word would be sufficient. I think he is much the nicest of the lot, but he would be far happier with Audrey Wilmot than with me. It's a pity he can't see it, for she is madly in love with him."

"He probably likes her best," said Lady Varleigh, "but feels he can't afford her."

"She can't be very expensive. She's only a doctor's daughter," said Jeannette.

"With nothing to her name, that's the worst of it. Such a pretty girl too." Lady Varleigh spoke compassionately. "It only shows, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't show." Jeannette spoke with sudden energy. "If he really cares for her, he's a pig to think of anyone else. That's all I have to say."

"But you're rather attractive, darling," pointed out Lady Varleigh.

"I don't care. Audrey's a darling and he's a beast to slight her—if he cares." Jeannette's voice shook with indignation.

"My dear, you know the sort of person he is. He will probably marry her when you finally turn him down. And by the same token Skittles will marry little Valerie West and Bandy will capture Daphne Somers. It is as I said, Jeannette. All the old lovers will marry—all but one. And even he may in time, though he will never forget his dream. That's the hell of it. There is always one dream that no one can forget."

"I don't believe Skittles will ever marry Valerie," said Jeannette.

"He will, dear. Mark my words! And they will make a very happy pair too. Bless me, I believe you're half in love with Skittles. But you mustn't marry him, Jeannette. You would never stand him. He would never satisfy you. A charming lover, I grant you, but a trying husband. Valerie won't mind. But you—oh no, not you, dear. Well, let me see! Who comes next on the list? What about Lord Conister?"

Jeannette's pointed chin went up.

"What's the matter with him?" said Lady Varleigh.

The girl began to laugh. "Nothing. He is wonderful, isn't he? Do you think he will ever stoop to ask a banker's daughter to become Lady Conister of Culverley?"

"I don't know why he shouldn't. He'd be very lucky to get you," declared Lady Varleigh warmly. "But he is very cold and aristocratic. I am not sure about him, darling. Do you think you like him?"

"Yes," said Jeannette in her brief, decided way. "I do."

Lady Varleigh's thick brows went up. She opened her eyes wide. "*Vraiment,* Jeannette! You love him?"

"I don't—know," said Jeannette, with a frown.

"My dear!" said Lady Varleigh. "Oh, wouldn't that be splendid?"

"I don't—know," said Jeannette again.

Lady Varleigh clasped her hands ecstatically together. "I can see you!" she declared. "I can see you, Jeannette, —a perfect jewel in a perfect setting. Lady Conister of Culverley! My dear, he is a friend of Royalty! Think of it! You might entertain the King!"

Jeannette's eyes gleamed a little. "But I shouldn't marry him for the King's sake all the same," she said.

"No!" agreed Lady Varleigh. "But because you like him. How nice, Jeannette! I am so glad, darling. I wonder if he will propose to you to-morrow. You'll accept him if he does, won't you?"

"I don't—know," said Jeannette for the third time. "Besides,—he may not propose."

"My dear, I am convinced he will. You will say Yes if he does? Come now! Promise me! It's so important. And it would really be a grand match for you —though of course that doesn't count. I don't mean that, Jeannette. Only it would be nice, wouldn't it, darling, to have the King to come and stay with you? Perhaps you would let me come and help! I'd try very hard not to get in the way." She paused for breath. "And he's quite a nice man too, I'm sure,—Lord Conister, I mean. One of the strong, silent kind, dear, so thrilling

to some of us and so exasperating to others! Come, Jeannette! You will say Yes if he does!"

"It depends," said Jeannette.

"What on, darling?" Almost feverishly her friend asked the question.

"On how he does it," said Jeannette.

"Oh, but no man ever shows to advantage when he is proposing. You mustn't expect too much at such a moment. Get him to propose, that's the main thing. Come, dear, promise me! You won't refuse him when it comes to the point?"

Jeannette's keen eyes took a swift glance around her, as though she searched the horizon. It was like the flight of a bird. Returning, they met Lady Varleigh's scrutiny with a little smile in them, the smile that guards hidden things.

"Oh, no!" she said. "I shan't refuse him. I shan't break my heart for him either—if he doesn't come to the point."

"What a strange girl you are, Jeannette!" said Lady Varleigh. "But I love you—I love you! Now that's settled, isn't it? And I want to hear all about the preparations for to-morrow's festivities!"

## CHAPTER III

### NORMAN WYNGOLD

THE preparations in which Lady Varleigh took such a keen interest were being carried out on a very extensive scale. The coming of age of Jeannette Wyngold, the great banker's daughter, was an event of considerable importance in Bentbridge and all the surrounding district. It was well known that Norman Wyngold idolized his only child, and the fact that she was sole heiress to all his vast wealth was sufficient of itself to place her in a prominent position in County circles. Her youth and her undoubted personal fascination surrounded her with a certain atmosphere of romance. Though she had been presented two years before, she had not mingled very freely with London society. She did not care for London, and its fevered round of gaieties held small attraction for her, so she had kept, as it were, on the outside edge of the whirlpool. But even so, that odd, secret charm of hers had not passed unnoticed. She had had her mead of admiration. She might have married in her first season, but she had held back. Some said her devotion to her father was the cause of it. Others maintained that money had spoilt her, and that she nursed ambitions which made the thought of an ordinary mar-

riage distasteful to her. And there were a few, like Lady Varleigh, who put down her reluctance to a love of independence which she of all people was most in a position to enjoy.

Whatever the cause, she had refused every offer, consistently and systematically, and now on the eve of her twenty-first birthday she was still the maiden-queen of her little court.

The birthday celebrations were to last over several days, beginning with a grand ball on the actual day itself and ending with a pageant in which all the Starfields guests as well as all the townspeople were to take part. There was a large house-party for the occasion, and the girl herself was acting as hostess. It was a rôle she loved and very ably filled. No one could ever say of Jeannette that she was indifferent to the welfare of her guests. The task of entertaining held a very special appeal for her, and she fulfilled it to perfection. House-parties at Starfields were always successful, mainly because all the members thereof were made to feel that they had only to please themselves. Boredom was unknown there. People came and went exactly as they liked, and there were very few who realized how much thought was expended by Jeannette upon achieving their comfort and content.

Norman Wyngold knew more than most. He recognized the touch of genius in his daughter which made her the perfect hostess, and he delighted in her popularity with a pride that far exceeded any pleasure he had ever derived from his own success. It was by his desire that the birthday celebrations had assumed such gigantic proportions. The whole of Starfields was to be transformed in Jeannette's honour. The grounds were being lavishly decorated and illuminated, the town decked with flags. The lake was to be the scene of a water-fête that even-

ing, and was crowded with gondolas, adorned with bunting and flowers.

The house was already full of guests, and a string band was playing down by the water-side. It was the end of September and golden weather. And the man who had devised it all stood by the window of his room and looked forth with more of anxiety than pleasure on his care-worn face.

Jeannette had left a deputy to preside at tea during her absence at Varleigh Park. But she had promised not to be late back, and he expected her now at any moment. He wished she would return, for somehow of late he was always uneasy when she was away from him. He himself cared nothing for the crowd of chattering guests who filled his house. In the whole of his world Jeannette was all that mattered. But Jeannette's social status was of vast importance in his eyes. He had never pressed her to marry, but he was determined that when she did she should have the best to choose from. He spread all of the earth that he could reach at her feet, and left the choice to her. His faith in her judgment had been absolute from the moment that he had realized that admiration had no effect upon her. She had inherited his keen business brain, and he was satisfied. Jeannette would go far, and if happiness were not ultimately her portion it would be neither her fault nor his, but the decree of fate.

So he mused, as he waited for her on that autumn afternoon alone in his room, to which, by some unwritten law, no guest ever penetrated. The sunlight lay golden on the old oak furniture, throwing dappled gleams upon the brown-backed books on the shelves. He had begun life as a solicitor, and the place was crammed with volumes of legal lore. Financial tomes and books on banking were also piled everywhere. They were his

recreation. But at the moment he had no thought for these. He stood at the window, watching the distant winding drive along which the car that carried her would pass. And the fine lines deepened on his face while he waited, giving him a drawn, tired look.

Ah! He heard the sound of the hooter and his eyes brightened. Now he saw the car sweeping round the bend—her own car which he had given her two years previously, and which she invariably drove herself. She was a careful driver, but she always put on speed along that particular stretch of drive. He marked her now, flashing through the evening sunlight with the swiftness of a bird, and a faint smile softened the grimness of his mouth. She had kept her word.

He turned back into the room, and lighted a cigarette. When she entered a few minutes later, he was seated smoking in a deep leathern arm-chair, with some papers in his hands.

He looked up to greet her. "I thought you were going to be late, Jeannette."

"I don't know why you should," said Jeannette. She came and sat on the wide arm of his chair. "Have you been wanting me, dear?" she questioned.

He looked up at her, and a great tenderness shone in his eyes for a moment. "Well?' he said. "You have been to Lady Varleigh?"

She leaned down and kissed him. "Yes. She was very sweet to me. There was no one else there. We had a heart to heart talk,—and finished up practically as we began."

"What did you talk about?" asked Wyngold.

"Marriage," said Jeannette.

"Ah! Does she recommend it?"

Jeannette laughed. "She has had ample experience, hasn't she? Yes, on the whole she does recommend it

—on the principle that it is better to take the love disease early than late. I suppose she thinks there are more chances of recovery without being disfigured for life."

"That is one point of view," said Wyngold quietly. "There are others of course. But you are in a position to please yourself. When you take the love disease, I hope you will never recover from it."

Something in his tone moved her; she stooped, and laid her cheek to his forehead in silence.

He put his arm round her. "Jeannette, it is just twenty-one years to-morrow since the one being on earth who mattered went from me, and you came in her place. Since that day, you have come first with me in everything. Nothing has counted with me except your happiness."

"I know," whispered Jeannette.

He went on very gravely. "As long as I live, it will be so. But lately—lately—I have sometimes thought that my life may not be a very long one. No, dear, no, there is nothing the matter with me, so far as I know. But life is an uncertain thing, and there are no near relations to take my place. It would be a great comfort to me to feel that there would be someone to take care of you when I failed. I shouldn't like to leave you alone, Jeannette. The world is hard on lonely women, even the rich ones. And you—you might have more to face than you realize."

"I am not afraid," said Jeannette.

"No, dear. But you don't know what there is to fear." Her father spoke wearily. "Lady Varleigh is wise, and if you can see your way to take her advice, I hope you will. It would be a great weight off my mind."

His words went into silence. They sat for a space without moving, and the shadows lengthened in the quiet room as the sun sank behind the trees.

The girl stirred at length, looking down at the head which she pillowed against her arm.

"How white you're getting, dear!" she said. "It isn't worry, is it?"

He roused himself. "Worry! Bless me, no! Do you know what I've got here? You'll never guess if you go on all night!"

"Then I shan't try," said Jeannette. "I value my night's rest far too much. So tell me at once!"

He lifted his face to hers, surveying her with eyes remarkably like her own in their keenness. He held up the papers in his hand.

"The contents of my Jeannette money-box!" he said. "The savings of twenty years, child, which will be yours to-morrow!"

"My dear!" said Jeannette, taken by surprise for once. "But what does that mean?"

He sat up. His eyes were shining as though a torch had been lighted behind them. He spoke, quietly, but with a throb in his voice which she was to remember long after.

"It means exactly one hundred thousand pounds, Jeannette,—five thousand pounds a year saved from the date of your first birthday."

"My dear!" said Jeannette again.

His arm tightened about her. He pulled her down on to his knee. "Are you pleased?" he asked.

"I don't know." She frowned a little. "It's very wonderful of course,—very, very good of you. But why should you give all that to me?"

"Because I want you to have it," he said. "I want to feel that you are safe, my little Jeanie. It will all be legally yours to-morrow, and no on can take it from you. And you can marry whom you will. No one can say that you are not a good match for any one of them.

Remember that, dear! And when you make your choice, choose well!"

Again his words went into silence, during which the girl bent and looked at him very closely, till he made a slight movement at length as of protest against her scrutiny.

Then she spoke. "Father, why are you so tragic to-night?"

He did not answer.

"Won't you tell me?" she said. "Is it because all this makes you think more than usual of my mother?"

"I can't tell you, dear," he said. "It may be—partly that."

"And if I were to marry—" pursued Jeannette, and broke off. "Do you know what I said to Lady Varleigh this afternoon?"

He shook his head.

"I said," said Jeannette, "and it was absolutely true, that there wasn't a man on this earth so far as I was concerned who could compare with my father."

He stirred again at that, uneasily. "You are not a very impartial judge, dear," he said.

"I said, so far as I was concerned," reiterated Jeannette. "And now, Father, listen! When I marry—if I marry—it will be to please you that I do it. I want you to understand that I am not sentimental like other girls. I can do without men in my life—all but you. I can't do without you, and whoever I marry will have to understand that."

He patted her hand. "We can settle that when the time comes."

"The time may come soon," said Jeannette.

"Ah!" His look came to her again. "Is it so? You are going to reward young Buck Wetherby at last?"

"No!" Jeannette spoke with sharp exasperation. "Why

do you all try to saddle me with Buck? Nothing would induce me to marry him. Surely you realize that!"

"I had not." He scanned her flushed face gravely. "I had a notion that he meant more to you than some. But ——"

"You never thought I was in love with him!" challenged Jeannette.

"No, dear. I never thought you were in love with anyone. But Buck is a good sort, and I thought it possible you might some day come to care for him. Don't run away with the idea that I want you to marry him! You might do very much better for yourself, and I hope you will."

"Thank you," said Jeannette. "Well, he certainly is not in the running. I think he is the stodgiest person I have ever met,—worse, far worse, than the Dough-nut, which is saying much."

Her father smiled. "I think you're a bit hard on the fellow, but, as I said, I have no desire that you should marry him. You should look higher than an out-at-elbows country squire, however old his family. Who is the lucky man then, Jeannette? Whisper!"

Jeannette's answering smile had something of an indulgent quality. "I'll leave you to guess—as you're so good at it," she said. "But I think you'll be pleased anyhow. And now, dear, put all this wealth away until tomorrow! Fancy saving up all that for me! You're a wonderful man, aren't you?" She bent again to kiss him. "Thank you, Father!"

He clasped her to him for a moment. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, my Jeanie," he said. "All I have done in these last years has been for you. I have had my dreams for you too, but I have come to realize that all that really matters is your happiness. I want that —as I want nothing else in life."

He spoke with unwonted emotion, his face pressed against her so that she could not see it. Jeannette laid her cheek against the whitening hair.

"Don't you worry about me!" she said. "I shall be happy, you may be sure. I should be very ungrateful if I weren't, after all the provision you have made for me."

"Money doesn't always bring happiness," he said. "It sometimes helps towards it, that's all. But you will be happy, Jeannette. You are young and vigorous. You have beauty, wealth, and strength of character to enjoy them. When once you are happily married, I shall feel that all is well with you."

"Then I must see what can be done," said Jeannette. "Now don't you think we ought to go and see what everyone is doing? I certainly must."

She slipped to her feet as he released her, and they stood together for a moment in the fading light—the man with weariness in his worn, handsome face, his shoulders slightly bent, the girl with her vivid personality and almost defiant pride of bearing, her shrewd eyes gleaming with the vitality of youth—a marked contrast, yet curiously alike.

She stretched out her hands to him suddenly as she stood. "Father, you're tired. You must take a rest from business when this is over. You need it."

He sighed, and drawing her to him, kissed her once again. "I shall be taking a long rest one of these days, my Jeanie," he said.

## CHAPTER IV

### HER COURT

A NIGHT that was as warm as summer succeeded the golden day. Jeannette and her father were giving a dinner-party previous to the water-fête and all the young element among their Bentbridge neighbours were joining the house-party.

Jeannette stood to receive them in the great drawing-room. She was dressed in blue and silver which imparted to her a certain butterfly charm not wholly characteristic of her. Her brown hair was dressed with absolute simplicity, drawn back slightly from her face and showing her dainty ears. It clustered very sweetly about her temples, giving her an almost childish look. Her eyes too had the pleased look of a child who smiles over some secret.

There was no shyness in her bearing. Jeannette had never been shy. But neither had it any self-assertion. She was just herself, young, brilliant, and quite sure of her standing among her many well-wishers.

"What ever have you done to yourself?" whispered Audrey Wilmot, the doctor's daughter, as she eagerly returned Jeannette's welcoming and not wholly expected kiss. "You are simply wonderful."

"Don't be ridiculous!" smiled Jeannette. "We are all wonderful sometimes."

She gave the younger girl a nod of appreciation, and turned to greet another comer. Audrey was far prettier in the usually accepted sense of the word than she was herself, and she recognized the fact without envy. Perhaps she realized that with very little effort she could attain to heights which Audrey could never approach. In any case jealousy was not in her nature, or if it were it was wholly undeveloped. She was perhaps too secure upon her throne to be aware of any comparisons, or again, perhaps she was too royally generous to care.

To the man who followed Audrey she gave some laughing advice. "You had better secure her for your partner on the water to-night. She'll be snapped up if you don't."

"I was hoping to secure you," said Major Sterne, holding her hand for a second. "Was that very audacious of me?"

She freed her hand immediately. "No harm in hoping if you don't go on too long. But if you get left, don't say it's my fault!"

"Everything is your fault," he said, ruefully humorous.

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Oh, please don't be funny at my expense! I'm afraid I'm too busy to listen. I have given you sound advice anyhow, so the blame is not mine if you don't take it."

She dismissed him with a careless gesture, and turned to find another man waiting for her notice.

"Poor old Dough-nut!" he said, as their hands met. "You always seem to be polishing him off, and yet somehow he is never quite done for."

She laughed. The sight of his red, good-tempered countenance was obviously pleasing to her. "Oh, Cap-

tain Friar! So you've come! Isn't it a jolly crowd?"

"You might call me Jack," he said, "just for to-night."

Her eyes shone with a glint of malice that was wholly friendly. "All right, Jack! Just for to-night!" she said lightly. "You'll have to find your own partner. If I were you, I should cut out Skittles with Valerie West."

"And leave Skittles to cut me out with you," said Friar.

Her eyes went beyond him. "You couldn't either of you do that," she remarked enigmatically. "Hullo, Skittles! Where's Bandy?"

"If I'd been Bandy, I suppose you'd have said, 'Where's Skittles?'" rejoined that young man, shaking hands unimpressively.

Jeannette's chin went up. "If I had been interested in your whereabouts, I might, but I can't imagine it," she said.

Skittles laughed, wholly unabashed. "You really ought to train your imagination a little. You'd find life so much more interesting. I'll help you train it, if you like."

His dark eyes dared her snub, and—perhaps for that very reason—Jeannette refrained from inflicting it. She smiled upon him with kindness.

"Thank you, Christopher. Perhaps I'll let you try some day, but not to-night. I have too much to think about."

"I like to see you holding your court," said Skittles, at once presuming on her clemency. "That's another thing I might help you with if you would allow me."

His handsome brown face smiled into hers with charming effrontery. It was said among his friends that he could go further than any man on forbidden ground before being turned off.

But Jeannette was fully equal to him. She gave him a smile that was diamond-like in its sharp brightness.

"I am sure you would be most efficient in that respect as in every other," she said. "And when I require your help I'll be sure to let you know. Oh, Valerie dear, I didn't see you. How is Colonel West? Is he getting better?"

The girl she addressed—a merry little soul with a wide and generous smile and hair the colour of sunflowers—received her notice with the breathless delight of a humble adorer.

"Oh, quite well, thank you, Jeannette. I mean, much better. Very cross, you know, and all that, poor old dear. But nobody minds—so long as he isn't really bad. May I stay with you a little while? You are so beautiful to-night and I want to hear what everybody says."

She was as anxious to garner the compliments showered upon Jeannette as if they had been paid to herself. Skittles had dubbed her "the maid of honour" long since. He grinned as she took up her proud position in Jeannette's train.

"You'll have much more fun if you come with me," he said.

Valerie's clear, childish eyes looked back at him in smiling refusal. "Oh no, thank you. Not yet. I'll stay with Jeannette just as long as she'll let me."

Skittles smiled and passed on. He was very fond of Valerie in his careless, inconsequent way. She was small fry of course, compared with Jeannette, but a very pleasing little stop-gap when Jeannette was not available.

"Oh, Jeannette," breathed the small eager voice behind her, "I've just seen Lord Conister. He's in the hall, talking to Buck. And oh, he looks so magnificent. I've never seen him nearer than on his big grey horse before. And he took off his hat to me once—at a meet—

when I got in his way—by mistake. Oh, Jeannette, fancy speaking to him! Aren't you excited?"

"Not in the least," smiled Jeannette. "Oh! Here he comes with my father! He does look rather big certainly."

It was the impression that Lord Conister made upon most people. He had the imposing presence of a man of the world, high-bred and self-assured. His clean-shaven features bore the unmistakable stamp of the old aristocracy. As Valerie murmured in an awe-struck whisper, "there was nothing ready-made about him."

He came up the room to Jeannette with easy confidence, fully aware of universal attention, yet unembarrassed by it. He had, in fact, the air of regarding it as his due. And the girl waiting for him, stiffened a little at his approach, as though she paid instinctive tribute to his rank.

To the man himself she betrayed neither shyness nor more than the pleasure dictated by ordinary courtesy. She gave him her hand with a smile of welcome.

"How do you do, Lord Conister? I hope we shall not be too frivolous for you to-night."

"I enjoy frivolity occasionally," he said. "Is it too soon to offer you my good wishes?"

"Won't you keep them for to-morrow?" she smiled back. "I haven't quite qualified for them yet."

"Perhaps I may offer them to-night as well," said Lord Conister. "Then I can be sure of your receiving them in any case."

The little maid of honour in the background gasped her appreciation of his graciousness. How magnificent he was! And Jeannette—Jeannette, though everything she did was so perfect, scarcely seemed to realize the greatness of the honour bestowed upon her. She actually treated him as an equal, but then why should she not?

Was she not as a queen in her own right? A sudden thought went through Valerie. How wonderful if Lord Conister should choose her for his own queen! What a splendid couple they would make!

Eagerly she listened to their talk. Yes, he was asking her to be his partner on the water to-night. But then of course it was the duty of every man to do that. Would she accept him? And here was Buck, waiting behind him for his turn! Their eyes met, and they smiled a greeting to each other. She had always liked Buck. What a pity that he and Jeannette—But no, Jeannette and Lord Conister were made for one another. Buck must stand aside with the rest.

He showed no impatience, standing there,—a very ordinary young man, extremely trim of appearance, with a short, brown moustache and steady grey eyes that always seemed to Valerie to see a very long way. He heard Jeannette accept Lord Conister for a partner without any sign of discomfiture though Valerie well knew that he had earnestly desired to secure her for himself.

As Lord Conister bowed and passed on he stepped forward.

"After that, it is useless for me to propose myself as a candidate, Miss Wyngold," he said. "May I have the last three dances to-morrow instead?"

That was typical of Buck. He always made the best of things, and when he failed in one aspiration he invariably transferred his efforts to another forthwith. His persistence excited Valerie's admiration, but curiously, it had the opposite effect upon Jeannette; it usually exasperated her.

She replied now with that hard, bright smile of hers. "I couldn't think of saving three for you."

"No?" he said. "Then which may I have?"

"The last," said Jeannette promptly, and turned to greet another guest.

Buck came and stood beside Valerie. "I hope you will take pity on me to-morrow," he said.

"Of course I will!" said Valerie, warmheartedly.

"Thank you," said Buck, and smiled. "May I have the first three?"

He had a pleasing smile, somewhat like that of Skittles but without the devilry.

"Of course you may," said Valerie.

"Thank you," Buck said again. "Are you engaged for to-night? Ah! I see," as her look went beyond him almost unconsciously to a corner of the room where Skittles' frequent laugh betrayed his presence. "I'll ask you later."

"Thank you," breathed Valerie.

Out of her loyalty to Jeannette, she had refused to go with Skittles, but she could not help hoping that Skittles would return to her. He usually did when he could not get Jeannette.

Jeannette turned round to her suddenly. "Valerie, I believe Captain Friar is looking for you. He doesn't know many people here, so you might have an eye to him for me."

"Of course," said Valerie.

It was a distinct order, and faithfully she accepted it as such, albeit with regret. Captain Friar was very nice, but she was more at her ease with the Wetherbys, who were close neighbours, than with any of Jeannette's town friends. She caught sight of Captain Friar's jolly red face in the distance, and with a smile to Buck moved away in his direction.

Jeannette threw a fleeting glance at Buck—a glance that was eloquent of disparagement though she said nothing.

He smiled at her imperturbably. "What a splendid show! Are you enjoying it?"

"Not this part," said Jeannette. She turned from him somewhat pointedly to greet a red-haired youth who had just entered.

"Hullo, Bandy! I'd nearly given you up for lost. Been beagling?"

"All day," said Bandy. "Very nearly didn't come at all, and I shan't stay now if there's no prospect of seeing anything of you. Is there?"

Jeannette laughed. "I call that demanding favours at the sword's point. If that was what you wanted, you ought to have come earlier—or not at all."

"That was what we all wanted," said Buck behind her. "But Bandy always turns up last for everything—on principle, you know."

"I'm usually in at the death anyway," said Bandy, "which is more than can be said for you, Buck."

"If you Wetherbys want to quarrel," said Jeannette, "you must go and do it elsewhere. I am much too busy to arbitrate."

"Oh, Buck never quarrels," said the younger brother. "Too much trouble."

"No necessity," said Buck. The best man is sure to win in the end."

Again for an instant Jeannette's glance swept him and in her eyes there seemed to be a veiled taunt. "Would you like to be best man?" she said.

"Very much," said Buck.

Her straight mouth took a mocking curve. "Perhaps you will—some day," she said.

"That is what I am hoping for," said Buck.

Jeannette's laugh held a light note of derision. "I will remember that," she said.

## CHAPTER V

### LORD CONISTER

"Am I to have the pleasure of taking you in to dinner?" asked Lord Conister, as his young hostess paused beside him for a moment after the last guest had arrived.

She turned with her radiant, impersonal smile. "Lord Conister, do you mind? We are waiving all ceremony to-night, and everyone is to choose his own partner."

"But I have already chosen—you," he said, with a humorous little bow.

"Oh, but everyone has done that," said Jeannette, "and everyone has had to make a second choice in consequence."

"Must I also do so?" asked Lord Conister.

"I am afraid so," said Jeannette, "just for dinner. Afterwards——"

"Afterwards you are engaged to me," he said. "And may I ask upon whom the light of your favour it to shine during dinner?"

There was a suspicion—a bare suspicion—of disapproval in his voice, and Jeannette gave a little laugh as it reached her. It ran through her words as she answered him.

"Upon someone who has a greater right to it than anyone else in the world," she said.

"Indeed!" said Lord Conister. "I was not aware——"

"Yes, indeed!" she cut in lightly. "And you are aware and always have been. I am going in with my father."

"Ah!" said Lord Conister. "That makes a difference." He laughed with her. "I congratulate you, Miss Wyngold. You almost made me jealous."

"That is indeed something to be proud of," jested Jeannette. "Have you never suffered from that complaint before?"

"Never very seriously," he admitted.

She turned carelessly away. "Then your education has been sadly neglected. Someone ought to take you in hand."

"I hope someone will," he said quietly, "but not for that purpose."

The words reached her, but she gave no sign. Not even her father knew of the thrill at her heart as she came to him and, laughing, took his arm. He looked at her with pride and noted her brilliance and the wonderful vitality of her, and his own heart thrilled as he went with her. His little Jeannette shone as a queen among her courtiers.

Dinner was certainly a very unceremonious affair. Everyone was in high spirits, apparently, and a general air of festivity reigned supreme. Jeannette sat by her father's side, and her guests chose their own places. But the one on her right by tacit consent was left for Lord Conister, and he occupied it as one who had a right. He and Jeannette talked together upon casual topics throughout the meal.

When it was over, he remained by her side, and as they all trooped forth into the splendid, illuminated gar-

dens he drew nearer to her till the white wrap she had flung about her actually brushed his arm. It was then that for a moment Jeannette drew back. "Let them all go first!" she said.

He stopped at once. All the rest were running down to the water-edge where the shining gondolas awaited them, gay as children on a holiday.

"Will you wait here?" Jeannette said with a touch of constraint. "I just want a word with my father."

"Certainly," he said courteously. "As long as you like."

She thanked him with a glance and ran back to the house, obeying a blind instinct that in some fashion compelled.

She had last seen her father in the hall outside the dining room, but he was not there upon her return. She ran on swiftly to the study.

The door was shut, but she had always been privileged to enter without permission. She opened it, and stopped short.

"Father!" she said.

He was kneeling by the writing table with his back towards her, his head bowed upon his arms, his whole attitude eloquent of a suffering such as she had never before witnessed.

At the sound of the opening door and her quick exclamation he started, and before she reached him he was on his feet. But his face was ghastly, and though he smiled at her, he could not hide the haggard misery of his eyes.

"My dear!" she said. "What is it?"

He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Nothing, dear, nothing! I thought I was alone, and—I have a good deal to think about—to-night."

She looked at him searchingly. "Father, please! Won't

you tell me what is the matter? You know you can trust me."

He made a slight movement of restraint. "Don't question me, Jeannette! I have told you—nothing is the matter. Can't you understand? You—with your quick sympathy!" He ended with a sigh.

She pressed close to him instantly. "Yes, dear, yes! Of course I understand. Don't doubt it for a moment! Only I can't bear to leave you in here alone—brooding over the past. You mustn't—truly you mustn't."

There was a slight quiver in her voice betraying an emotion very rare in Jeannette. Her father stooped and kissed her.

"I shall be all right, Jeanie. I have finished my brooding. Run along with your lover and be happy!"

She clung to him for a moment. Her words came muffled against him. "Father! I can't leave you! I can't!"

"Oh, nonsense!" he said. "Nonsense! Run along, dear! I am going to be busy."

Yet for an instant longer her hold tightened. She was trembling a little. "Father, you would—really like me to —marry Lord Conister?"

He smiled down at her, and she saw that his eyes were more normal; the strain had passed. "Yes darling, yes," he said. "I should like to see you married to him as soon as possible."

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, and released him. "I shall still belong to you first, all the same," she said, as she turned away. "He has got to understand that."

"I shouldn't impose too many conditions of that sort if I were you," her father said, with his weary smile.

She threw him a nod from the doorway. "I shall be back before long, so be good!"

"Oh, I'll be very good," said Norman Wyngold.

She closed the door and ran, fleet-footed, back to the garden with its flowers and its fairy-lights and the lover who waited for her.

She found him pacing to and fro in the shadows where she had left him. He threw away his cigarette as she drew near, but he spoke no word.

"We won't go down to the water yet," said Jeannette. "Let them all get away first!"

She spoke a trifle breathlessly, for his silence was somehow disconcerting.

He spoke at once in his grave, courteous fashion. "Where would you like to go?"

"Let us walk up to the summer-house on the hill!" she said.

"By all means!" He turned beside her, and again she was aware, with unwonted nervousness, of his silence falling around her like an atmosphere from which it was impossible to escape.

They took a path through the shrubberies that led upwards to her favourite haunt—an eminence that overlooked the whole of Starfields on which her father had had an arbour erected for her and to which Jeannette was wont to bring her especial friends.

The night-air was soft and warm with a suggestion of rain. There were filmy clouds overhead through which the moon shone dimly at intervals.

Jeannette made no attempt to break the silence. Somehow she could not. Yet—though she was conscious of a certain embarrassment in the presence of the man beside her—her thoughts dwelt most persistently with the man she had left. She could not get rid of a certain feeling of tragedy. Why had he knelt so—as if overwhelmed by despair? Surely not for the memory of her mother after all these years! His misery was too

acute for that. Was it on her own account—because of this step she contemplated taking? But again, surely not! She was convinced that he desired her to take it. Then wherefore? Wherefore? She felt as one groping in darkness for a switch she could not find. There must be an explanation, but she was utterly unable to discover it.

A quiet voice came to her through the darkness. "You are not worried about your father, I hope?" said Lord Conister.

She started. The question came as a surprise, and in a moment the instinct to hide her anxiety awoke within her, though again wherefore she could not have said.

"Why, no!" she said. "What makes you ask?"

"A mere passing wonder," he said. "I thought he was looking rather harassed this evening."

"He works too hard," said Jeannette, "I hope he will take a holiday soon. I should like to go abroad for the winter if he can get away."

"Why, you have only just come down here," said Lord Conister. "We can't spare you so soon."

"Those are my plans," said Jeannette practically. "They may not come off of course, but I shall do my best."

He was silent for a second or two. Then: "Will you forgive me," he said, "if I say that I hope they will not come off?"

Jeannette uttered a little laugh. "You can say what you like," she said. "But they generally do."

"I wish I could say the same of mine," said Lord Conister.

"Can't you?" said Jeannette. "I mean, doesn't it rest with yourself?"

"Not entirely," he said

"But surely, to a large extent," she maintained.

"I wouldn't even say that," he answered.

"But where there's a will there's a way," Jeannette pointed out.

"Is there?" He sounded dubious. "I have asked myself that a good many times lately, and I must confess my faith on that point is none too stable."'

"How flabby!" remarked Jeannette.

He stiffened slightly, but in a moment relaxed again. "You see, Miss Wyngold, I am not like you," he said. "When I want a thing, I can't just reach out my hand and take it."

"Do you imagine that's all I ever do?" said Jeannette.

"I imagine most things come very easily to you," he said.

"They don't come of their own accord anyway," said Jeannette.

"No?" His voice had a curious note. "I wonder if I might ask you something," he said.

"I daresay you might." Briskly she made reply. "I reserve to myself the right to answer or not according to my discretion, of course."

"Of course," he conceded. "That is only fair. But I should very greatly like to know what is the thing you desire most on earth."

"What an extraordinary question!" said Jeannette. "I couldn't possibly answer it off-hand."

"No?" Again his voice had that somewhat dubious note. "Shall I tell you—would it interest you to know—what is my greatest wish at the present moment?"

"I don't know," said Jeannette. "You—you can tell me if you like. I'll tell you afterwards if it interests me or not."

The sudden falter in her voice surprised herself. She had not expected to experience any agitation, and she was

almost dismayed to find that her heart was beating unusually fast. Of all the proposals she had ever received, this was the one that stirred her most deeply. She was conscious of a strange impulse which had never before possessed her—a desire to escape or at least to postpone the moment of decision now that it had come upon her. She had imagined her decision already made, but now with unwonted distress she realized that she was no longer her own mistress. Something was bearing her forward along a path unknown. What would he say, what would he do, when she accepted him? She felt oddly like a frightened child.

And then, almost before she knew it, his hands were grasping hers, and he was speaking very earnestly, but with a restraint that she found intensely comforting.

"Yes, I will tell you," he said, "and take my chance like the rest. My greatest wish, Jeannette, is to win your love and to make you my wife. I think you knew it before, and I hope you have given me this opportunity because you are disposed to regard me favourably. I believe I could make you happy if you would allow me to try, and I would certainly do my best."

Yes, it was earnestly spoken, and there was a dignity in the words that appealed to her. Jeannette had listened to so many stammering assurances of love, and it was a relief to meet with someone who did not lose his head at the crucial moment. Yet she stood before him in silence, as one listening, almost as if there were something missing in his avowal or as if she expected something more.

He waited for a few seconds, then very gently spoke again. "Won't you answer me, Jeannette? Surely I have not taken you by surprise! You must have known."

"Oh, yes, I—I knew." Again she stumbled a little, for she still had that curious feeling of being at a loss,

of having somehow failed to catch her cue. "It isn't that," she said. "It isn't that."

"You mean you haven't made up your mind yet?" he said. "Perhaps I can help you to make it up."

"Oh, no!" said Jeannette, and caught her breath on a faint laugh as mirthless as it was involuntary. "It isn't that either. What an idiot you must think me!" She braced herself with an effort. "I made up my mind some time ago."

"Not to send me away, I hope?" he said.

She was silent, still waiting, still waiting, but for what she scarcely knew.

"Jeannette!" he said.

Questioning and reproach were in his voice. His hands still held hers, but he did not seek to draw her any nearer.

She made an odd, abrupt movement, as of one coming out of a dream. She spoke, almost with her accustomed briskness. There was nothing to be afraid of, after all. He was very like the rest.

"Would you mind very much if I did send you away?" she said.

"Very much," said Lord Conister. He paused; then: "Are you going to send me away, Jeannette?" he asked.

She looked up at him in the dim moonlight, trying to read his face. "I wonder why you want to marry me," she said abruptly.

"My dear girl!" he said. "Haven't I made you understand that even? Because I love you, of course."

"Are you sure you love me?" said Jeannette.

His hold tightened unmistakably. "I am quite sure," he said. "Do you doubt it?" There was sincerity in his voice though its restraint was still its most noticeable quality. It seemed to her that he was afraid to let himself go, afraid to commit himself too far, in case she

meant to dismiss him like the rest; and her business-like mind admired his caution even while her woman's heart resented it.

"Do you doubt it, Jeannette?" he said again.

"I don't want to," she said, after a moment. "Only—you didn't make it very clear, did you? Of course I know it's a great honour you are doing me. I appreciate that. But—it's not all on your side,—the worldly advantage, I mean. I'm not—not a mere nobody."

"You funny little girl," he said, "to think of that!"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not being funny. It's commonsense. When people are making up their minds to get married, they must try and see it sensibly. I shouldn't marry you just because you are Lord Conister and belong to the Royal Household, any more than I would like you to marry me because I am the daughter of Norman Wyngold, the great bank magnate. We must have something more than that to go upon, mustn't we?"

"Emphatically, yes," said Lord Conister.

"Without being sentimental," said Jeannette, feeling that she was in pursuit of something far beyond her reach but gallantly struggling on, "without being sentimental—which of course wouldn't appeal to either of us —we ought to be in a position to know for certain that when we are married we shall get on all right."

"Well, but if we love each other, my dear,—" he said.

"Wait!" said Jeannette. "Lots of people love each other —or think they do—beforehand. But afterwards—" she gave a quick little sigh— "they find out that it was only sentiment after all, not the real thing—not love, I mean,—at all. And then of course the glamour wears out with the trousseau, and there is nothing left but separation or divorce! I shouldn't like that to happen. When I marry, I do want to marry for good."

"Jeannette!" he said. "You are the most amazing girl I have ever met."

"No. I'm only being sensible," said Jeannette. "I should so hate to be bothered with a husband if I didn't like him. Wouldn't you hate it?"

"Of course," he said. "But then, that isn't going to happen with you and me, Jeannette. I shouldn't ask you to marry me if I hadn't some slight reason for thinking that at least you like me."

"Oh, that's very sensible," said Jeannette with relief. "So many men don't bother about my side at all, and won't even listen when I tell them they don't attract me. It's so boring when they will keep on loving you whatever you say. It makes me cross."

"You funny little girl!" he said again. "Well, I promise you this. I don't want to marry you in the least, unless you feel that you would like to marry me. I quite agree that that is the only solid ground to go upon. I'm not taking anything for granted, you see. I don't trust unknown quantities. But if once we can settle this point, I feel that there is a good chance of our being happy together—for good. I am like you again there, Jeannette. It must be for good. My family honour is very precious to me, and no breath of scandal is ever going to touch that through my marriage."

Jeannette's chin went up. "I shall never sully it," she said proudly.

"No. I know that. I shouldn't have said it. I am sorry," said Lord Conister, with unwonted humility. "If I were not sure of that, I shouldn't be asking you to help me guard it. Come, my dear, haven't we discussed this point enough? How much longer am I to be kept at arm's length?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Jeannette quickly. "I don't know. I—I——"

"I do," he said very quietly and decidedly, and drew her to him with a steady mastery that took no note of her half-hearted attempt to resist. "You have not sent me away, and therefore— therefore, Jeannette—I mean to stay."

He had her in the close holding of his arms as he ended, and Jeannette resisted him no longer. Only with amazing, overwhelming shyness, she hid her face from him, striving to still the wild clamour of her heart and to calm the awful sense of being caught and held against her will that oppressed her in that moment.

He was very patient with her, wholly kind and temperate in pressing his advantage, but he did press it with a quiet persistence that gave her no time for further consideration. She knew that when she lifted her face, she would have to meet his kiss.

"Don't be afraid, my little girl!" he said. "I am not one of your fortune-hunters. I want you for yourself. And you like me a little, don't you, Jeannette? You've admitted that."

"Yes, I like you," she whispered. "But—you know—I'm not the kind that falls wildly in love. You know that, don't you?"

"I am not asking that of you, my dear," he said. "And I am not offering it. You needn't—really you needn't be afraid."

That reassured her, albeit again her resentment was vaguely awakened. She lifted her face from its shelter.

"And there's one thing more," she said, "before you—before you take anything more for granted. I'll marry you if you like, but—I can't leave my father. I must—at least I must stay within reach of him always."

"My dear, I honour you for that," he said. "I promise you that your wishes shall always be respected in this as in everything else. Now may I kiss you, Jeannette?"

She gave him her lips, but she did not return his kiss. Somehow, unreasonably, she wished that he had taken what he wanted without asking. Her brain was a chaos of conflicting emotions, but a curious wonder predominated. For through her bewilderment there ran Lady Varleigh's words spoken that afternoon: "One of the strong, silent kind, so thrilling to some of us and so exasperating to others." Was she thrilled or was she exasperated? She wished she knew.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE OLD LOVERS

She had expected a sensation of triumph at least, but as they walked down the hill together she was conscious of no elation. Perhaps it was the reaction after the unwonted agitation of the past hour, but she was scarcely aware of any feeling at all. The only active thought in her brain was the desire to get back to her father.

Lord Conister seemed to understand her mood, and he made no attempt to hinder her. They spoke but little, but there was no sense of embarrassment between them.

Only, as the sound of laughing voices rose from the hidden lake, Jeannette said with sudden impulse: "You won't mind if we don't tell anyone—except my father—before to-morrow?"

"Why, no," he said. "It is what I should prefer myself. We will keep to-night sacred, Jeannette."

Something in his tone moved her. She put out a hand to him. "You do think we shall be happy together?" she said half-wistfully.

He gave her hand a warm, steady clasp and released it. "Yes, dear. I am sure of it," he said.

They re-entered the house, and Jeannette led him to her father's room. At the door she paused as if irresolute.

"I wonder—would you mind if I saw him alone for a moment?" she said.

"Certainly not," he made answer in his courtly fashion.

And Jeannette softly entered.

She found her father seated in a leathern arm-chair with a reading-lamp beside him. His head was bent over some papers, and the light streamed upon it, so that she noticed afresh the growing silver in his hair. A little pang went through her. She left the door open behind her, and moved towards him.

He looked up with a smile. "Well, my Jeannette? Back again?"

She went to him and knelt down beside him. "Father," she said, "I have just promised to marry Hugh—Lord Conister. I—we came straight back to tell you."

He put his arm about her and held her very tightly. "My darling," he said. "God bless you!" and kissed her upturned face.

She clung fast to him. "It doesn't mean—it shan't mean—that I'm going to leave you," she whispered. "I've told him that, and he understands."

"God bless you!" he said again.

Jeannette's eyes filled with sudden tears. She turned her head quickly to hide them. There seemed something so forlorn about her father that night.

He stooped over her swiftly. "Jeanie,—my darling—you are happy?"

"Quite. Yes, quite," she said, and mastered herself with an effort. "He is very good. I am sure we shall both be happy. I left him outside. Shall we call him in?"

"Of course," said Wyngold.

He got to his feet, raising her with him, and turned towards the open door.

"I'll fetch him," said Jeannette.

"I am here," said Lord Conister, and entered.

He saw the girl standing with her father's arm around her, and a very kindly look came into his face as he advanced. He had never shown to better advantage in Jeannette's eyes than at that moment.

"I have not come to take her away from you, sir," he said. "I only ask for a share."

"It will be the lion's share," said Wyngold, holding out his hand. "And I shall not grudge it to you. You have won a prize, and I can trust you to take care of it."

"You may rely on me to do my best," said Lord Conister.

He gripped the banker's hand hard, looking him straight in the face with the words, and there was a brief, somewhat tense silence between them which Jeannette broke with a little laugh.

"Don't let us be tragic about it, please!" she said. "Or I shall begin to think marriage is a mistake. Now, Father, come out with us! We are going on the water."

"No, no!" said Wyngold. "Not for the world." He smiled at her. "You go together and enjoy yourselves with my blessing! I am very busy to-night."

"Don't work too hard!" pleaded Jeannette. "Really we are not so selfish as most engaged couples. We don't want to be by ourselves all the time, do we?" appealing to her *fiancé*.

He smiled at her also. Her flushed face with its keen vitality held an irresistible charm that night. "I really don't know what answer to give to that," he said. "But I won't stand out for solitude, so long as I may have you all the time." He turned to her father. "You would no doubt like to have a talk with me, sir. I am at your service at any time either now or in the future."

"To-morrow," said Norman Wyngold. "I won't drag you down from the heights to-night. Moreover, I am sure our talk will be a pleasant one," he added. "So have

no scruples about enjoying the present! I am delighted both on my daughter's behalf and my own."

"You are very good," said Lord Conister. "Shall we go then, Jeannette?"

But Jeannette lingered for a moment longer. "We are not going to tell anyone till to-morrow, Father dear. We don't want to be bothered with a crowd of congratulations to-night."

"To-morrow will be a great day," said Wyngold. "When is the announcement to be made then?"

"Not till the evening," said Jeannette. "You can tell everybody at supper if you like. Will that suit you?" turning again to her *fiancé*.

"Whatever pleases you, Jeannette," he made reply. "I will ride round in the morning in any case, and—if I am lucky—perhaps I shall get you to ride with me."

"Oh, perhaps," smiled Jeannette. "Well, good-bye then, Father! Take care of your old self! I shall see you again presently."

She was at the door with the words. She threw a kiss to the weary-faced man on the hearth and passed out with her lover.

"Now we will go down to the lake," she said.

They passed through the garden again with its bobbing lanterns, its fairy-lights and its music, and so down to the water's edge where the last gondola awaited them.

"The royal barge!" said Lord Conister, as he handed her in.

She laughed a soft, low laugh. The magic of the night and the lapping water had entered into her. They sat down in the shadowy stern side by side, and with a buzz the little motor-boat shot out into the ripples. Lord Conister's hand came in quest of Jeannette's, and found and held it. The man at the wheel was as a part of the machinery. They hardly realized his presence.

"Happy?" whispered the lover.

"Yes," said Jeannette.

Her hand lay passive in his. Her eyes scanned the dark water. It was curiously like a dream.

"Jeannette!" Again his voice spoke at her side. "When we are married, we will go to Venice. We will float in a real gondola and hear the boatmen sing—and the bells of Saint Mark's—Will you like that, my little queen rose?"

She stirred with a hint of petulance. "I don't know," she said. "I think I would rather go to Egypt."

"Ah!" he said. "The land of orange and gold! Yes, we will do that. How soon, Jeannette?"

"I don't know," said Jeannette again. "It depends, doesn't it?"

"What on?" he questioned.

"On when we get married," said Jeannette.

"Well, naturally." A touch of displeasure sounded in his voice, and somehow she was glad. "That is what I was talking about."

"Oh!" said Jeannette.

"Are you trying to be provoking?" he asked in surprise.

"Not particularly," said Jeannette.

His displeasure passed, and he laughed. "Well, you had better not," he said. "They say I have a nasty bite when roused."

"How amusing!" said Jeannette. "Are you easily roused?"

"Not by you, my dear," he said. "I could never be angry with you."

"How dull!" said Jeannette, with a little sigh.

He leaned towards her. "Are you dull, child? I think I can remedy that."

"No, don't!" she said quickly. "I—don't want you

to. Let us wait till to-morrow! I don't want to talk about the future—or make any plans—to-night."

"Ah! I see," he said. "You have had enough. My dear, I understand. The present is enough for us to-night."

"Thank you," said Jeannette with simplicity.

They sank into silence, and again that dream-like sense of unreality came about her. Was she really engaged—captured at last, she who had eluded so many? Had she indeed promised herself to this man beside her? And what would the outcome be? But she would not pursue the thought. For some reason the future held no attraction for her to-night. Deliberately she turned her mind back, and fell to considering the old lovers, as Lady Varleigh had called them, one by one. There was Buck Wetherby of the Hall—that colourless young man who had openly laid his heart at her feet two years before and left it there with most exasperating persistence ever since. She wondered if he would at last change his allegiance now that she was engaged, but somehow she could not imagine any girl as her successor in this respect. All the rest would console themselves without a doubt. But Buck—no, Buck would continue unconsoled; of that she felt convinced. Not that he would really care. It was not in him to care very deeply. Of that she was convinced also. It was more lack of initiative than of any other quality that had kept him faithful for so long. His two brothers, Christopher and Bartholomew, always known as Skittles and Bandy, were different. They also were numbered among her adorers, but she was sure they did not expect to be taken seriously. They were a pair of cheery young subalterns who took life as they found it and enjoyed everything that came their way. Skittles was an incurable flirt, and she knew that he never troubled himself about her when she was not there. She came first with

him of course; that was always understood. But he was never inconsolable without her. More than once she had considered the possibility of marrying Skittles. His merry charm appealed to her; but it was against her judgment. He would make a jolly comrade in the sunshine, but she was not sure that he would be very dependable in storm. As for Bandy, well, of course he had never been in the running for a single moment and never could be, though she believed him to be more constant than Skittles. He would find consolation in his horses and dogs, and some day he would marry Daphne Somers, who was the most ardent sportswoman in the district and would probably suit him to perfection.

Yes, they were both very different from Buckley, the elder brother, who managed his own estate and never did anything worth doing besides. She took the homage of the other two for granted, but—somehow Buck's was rank presumption. He was so hopelessly unromantic, so worthy, so dull. Was there any woman in the world, she wondered, who could ever be thrilled by Buck?

Her thoughts drifted on. Would Major Sterne propose at once to Audrey now that she was definitely out of his reach? Her thin brows contracted. She would hate him if he did—for Audrey's sake, not her own. And then her face relaxed again. Poor old Dough-nut! He was very human, and it was impossible not to like him. But he never could have thought that she would bestow herself upon him. It could never have been more than a forlorn hope with him.

Captain Friar too—Jack for to-night—had he ever entertained any serious hopes of success with her? A very unusual little pang of self-reproach went through her. It was possible; yes, it was possible. She had always liked him, and she had not attempted to conceal the fact. He

was so honest, so sporting, so British. Yes, she was quite reasonably fond of Jack Friar, fond enough to hope that she would not lose his friendship through her marriage. She might have accepted him had things been different. She very nearly had accepted him once. But she had stopped in time. For Lady Burnholme, Jack's mother was one of those unendurably strongminded people who must manage all with whom they come in contact. To be managed by Jack's mother was no part of Jeannette's programme, and realizing that Jack was a complete slave himself to this formidable lady she had swiftly decided that she could never care enough for him to share his slavery. So she had given him her friendship and no more. Had he ever expected more, she wondered? Would he be hurt?

Again the slight frown drew her forehead. She turned with a touch of impatience to her silent companion. "I am quite ready to be amused now," she said. "Will you give me a cigarette?"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE REBEL

It was characteristic of Buck—so Jeannette said to herself—that he should be at hand to help her ashore when they returned from that magic cruise on the lake. He was always there when not wanted!

There were a good many people besides, all laughing and talking; but it was Buck who had taken to himself the right to receive her, Buck who, unobtrusive but resolute, stepped forward before anyone else to steady the gondola and hand her safely to land.

She accepted his help without visible reluctance, but she resented it none the less. She had worked hard to discourage him of late, and it was provoking to find all her efforts ignored. Unless she was actively rude to him, he never seemed to notice.

He remained beside her now, unobtrusive still but impossible to dislodge, evidently considering that his turn had come. She longed to dismiss him summarily, but checked the impulse. He wanted his lesson? Then he should have it!

"Have you been on the water, Mr. Wetherby?" she asked.

"No," said Buck.

"Couldn't you find a partner?" she said.

"I didn't try," said Buck.

Again she longed to make some tart rejoinder, but refrained. "Well, if everyone has had enough, we had better go back to the house," she said.

The band was still playing in the arbour at the end of the lake, and people turned in that direction instinctively.

"May I escort you?" said Buck.

"Lord Conister is escorting me," said Jeannette.

"Yes, but he has had you all the evening," said Buck, with slow humour. "He'll get himself disliked at this rate."

Lord Conister laughed. He and Buck were neighbours and sat on the Bench together, but otherwise they saw but little of one another.

"Have I your permission to retire in Mr. Wetherby's favour, Miss Wyngold?" he said.

Jeannette threw him a quick look. Her mind was made up on the instant. "I shall see you again," she said. "Go and have some refreshment, won't you? We shall soon be back."

And then deliberately she turned and walked away beside Buck.

The band-music came to them fitfully, mingling with the warm night-breeze .

"Kind of it not to rain," observed Buck.

That was typical of Buck. However romantic the setting, his remarks were always obvious and commonplace. Jeannette paid no attention. Surely he could hardly expect it of her! She walked on in silence.

Some seconds passed; then in the same tone in which he had commented upon the weather he spoke again.

"Am I to congratulate you?"

That roused Jeannette. It even startled her, calmly as it was uttered. How was it that this man of all others

always managed to strike a wrong note—he who mattered nothing to her, less than nothing?

She braced herself instantly to meet him on his own ground. "You can do exactly as you like," she said coldly.

"I thought so," said Buck. He paused a moment; then: "I wish you every happiness," he said.

A little thrill of anger went through Jeannette. Was he trying to bluff her? "You are very kind," she said, "but a little premature."

"You are engaged to him, aren't you?" said Buck.

"It will not be announced before to-morrow," she said.

"I see," said Buck, and again after a second's pause for thought: "Forgive me if I have spoken too soon!"

"You have not," said Jeannette. "It is quite true that Lord Conister has proposed to me, and I have accepted him. It will not be made public before to-morrow night, that's all."

"I see," said Buck again. "And—are you very happy?"

"Very," said Jeannette with defiance. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I wanted to know," said Buck simply. "You don't mind my knowing, I hope?"

That touched her, wherefore she knew not. Somehow she felt rebuked. "Of course not," she said. "It is very kind of you to care."

"I am bound to care," he said. "You know that."

"I don't know why you should," said Jeannette.

"I am bound to," he said again. "I can't help myself."

"It's rather a waste of time," said Jeannette, and there was actually a hint of compunction in her voice.

"What? To love you, you mean? But I have always

done that," said Buck. "I always shall. It doesn't seem a waste of time to me."

"Thank you," said Jeannette, and she spoke with a greater humility than she had ever before displayed. She almost liked him at that moment.

"You've nothing to thank me for," said Buck. "And you needn't be sorry for me either. Some people think of love as a disease. I don't. It has done me good to love you, and I am very glad that I do. Of course I knew you would never marry me under existing circumstances. What woman would?"

That stirred her afresh. The simplicity of his outlook on life held something of a sting. "I really don't know why you should say that," she said. "I think plenty of women might."

"Not heiresses," said Buck with conviction.

She uttered a little laugh that was somehow difficult. "You don't think much of women do you?" she said.

"I think the world of you," said Buck.

"And yet you think I wouldn't marry a poor man?" said Jeannette.

"No, I didn't say that." He corrected her quietly. "I only meant that you—women in your position—have so many to choose from that they naturally get rather hard to please."

Lady Varleigh's words again! Too many to choose from! They ran through Jeannette's brain like a refrain. And she remembered that Lady Varleigh had feared that she might lose the best thing in life for that very reason.

But Buck had no right to speak in this strain! He was beginning to presume. She hardened her heart against him.

"I don't agree with you" she said. "If you think it is

impossible to be rich and popular without having one's head turned you are wrong."

"But I didn't say that," said Buck again. "I think you are quite level-headed. I have always thought so."

"Thank you," said Jeannette, wondering why the term sounded so unpleasant from him.

"But I do say that if there had been fewer competitors my chance might have been a better one,' pursued Buck.

"You are quite mistaken," said Jeannette.

"It is sound logic," said Buck.

"It may be logic," she returned. "It isn't fact. There are some men who simply don't appeal to me in the least, and never could—under any circumstances."

"And I am one of them?" he asked.

Again her heart smote her. But he had been guilty of presumption and he must have his lesson.

"Yes," she said.

He stopped in his walk. They were in the shadow of a group of trees, and she could not see his face.

"You are saying this to hurt me," he said very quietly.

"No," said Jeannette.

"Forgive me!" he said. "That is not the truth."

"How dare you?" flashed Jeannette.

"Yes, you are angry." said Buck in his grave judicial way. "Shall I tell you why you are angry? Because you are ashamed of yourself. And you have reason to be. You have not treated me fairly. You have not treated any of us fairly: If you loved this man Conister, it would be different—it would be right. But you don't. You know you don't. And so it is wrong."

"How dare you?" said Jeannette again.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Buck. "I've nothing to lose. I am the rebel in your camp, and I don't mind telling you I always have been. But I have always

realized how heavily you were handicapped, and so I have made allowances. No, that isn't quite what I mean. I have loved you enough to understand, and though you have hated me, it hasn't made any difference. Because underneath it all, I know what you are. And oh, Jeannette, if you could be yourself for once—yourself without all this damnable pomp and circumstance dragging you down—how splendid—how beautiful—you would be!"

A deep note of sincerity sounded in his voice—the first sign of feeling he had given. And to Jeannette, quivering with indignation though she was, there came a curious sensation of respect such as only her father had ever before inspired in her. She thrust it from her, fiercely repudiating it, but it remained in the background of her consciousness, notwithstanding.

She stood quite motionless for several seconds after he had ceased to speak. This was more than an ordinary skirmish; she had to choose her weapon with care. To insult him was futile, to ignore him was impossible.

At length, with icy pride she made rejoinder. "Whatever I am, and whatever I may become, I shall never be any more to you than I am at this moment, so perhaps it is idle to discuss my failings any further. Shall we go back?"

She felt as if she were avoiding the issue, but the attack had been so unexpected that to withdraw seemed the only course. To have given battle would have been to have elevated him to a position from which, knowing his stubbornness of purpose, she realized she would have found it very difficult to dislodge him.

She turned away therefore in stately displeasure, regretting only that she had not adopted this attitude from the beginning.

He walked beside her in silence till they came within

sight of the rippling water with its many lights again. The band was playing a dreamy waltz, and some of the merry-makers had begun to dance.

It was almost their last moment of solitude when Buck spoke again. "Jeannette, shall I tell you how I think of you when I am alone with the memory of you in the old Hall over there? I have never told a soul but you, and I never shall. Are you too angry to listen?"

His persistence amazed her. That he should dare still to rank himself among her friends after his desecrating treatment of her! She did not speak in answer. There were no words to fit the occasion.

He went on very quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself. "You are the one dream of my life that I shall never forget. I think of you as a bird because of your wild-bird eyes. And sometimes I picture you coming to me for shelter out of the storm. But you never would, Jeannette? That is the very last thing you would do!"

"The very last," said Jeannette firmly.

"I thought so," said Buck.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LOVE TOKEN

"And you accepted him! My darling, what a thrill." said Lady Varleigh. "I do congratulate you with all my heart."

"But no one is to know of it before to-night," said Jeannette.

"I am as safe as houses," declared Lady Varleigh. "Come here, you funny child, and let me look at you! It was dear of you to come straight here on your birthday morning and tell me; and I am going to reward you. Ah, Jeannette! Jeannette! How wise you are—and how lucky!"

She drew the girl to her in her warm large way and kissed her with fervour.

"I think I am," said Jeannette.

"Have you any doubts, darling? If so, let me hear them—let me hear them all!" Lady Varleigh looked at her with shrewd kindliness. "My little swallow!" she said. "Just trying her wings for the long flight! What is she afraid of? Tell an old friend."

Jeannette hesitated for a moment or two, then decided to be frank. "I am not actually afraid," she said. "But —it is a big step to take, isn't it? And I had a talk

with Buck Wetherby last night—afterwards. It was rather an upsetting talk. He made me very angry,—though I quite see what he meant."

"Ah! Poor Buck!" said Lady Varleigh. "He is very hard hit, my Jeannette. You mustn't be angry."

"I'm not," said Jeannette. "At least not for that reason. I don't mind his being hard hit. It's his own affair. But he's no right to criticize my actions. I do object to that."

"Oh, great Scott!" said Lady Varleigh. "What a daring young man! My dear, what did you do? Did you pulverize him with one lightning glance of those hawk-like eyes of yours? I'm sure you could."

"I'm not laughing," said Jeannette, with a faint frown. "I can't help feeling that there was—well—something in what he said. And I've been thinking about it ever since."

"What an achievement for Buck!" said Lady Varleigh. "Well, sit down and tell me all about it! I'd love to hear."

She drew Jeannette down upon her favourite settee and held her hand, watching her with a solicitude that missed nothing.

"Tell me!" she said again.

"He seemed to think I was doing wrong," said Jeannette.

"What nonsense!" said Lady Varleigh, encouragingly.

"Yes, I know it's nonsense," Jeannette agreed with some vehemence. "All the same, part of what he said was true. That was why I hated him so for saying it."

"Well what was it, dear?" urged Lady Varleigh.

"This," said Jeannette. "That I didn't love Lord Conister, and therefore I was wronging—everybody—by marrying him."

"What nonsense!" said Lady Varleigh again with

vigour. "Surely you have a right to marry whom you like!"

"That was just it. He questioned my right. Oddly enough, I saw his point—at the time," said Jeannette. "I don't like to feel that I am doing anything unfair to anyone. And it's quite true, I am not madly in love with Hugh. I told him so."

"And what did he say?" asked Lady Varleigh.

"As far as I can remember, he said he wasn't either." Jeannette laughed a little. "We liked each other all the better for that, I think."

"Extraordinary!" said Lady Varleigh.

"No, not really. You've married—three times—without being in love." Jeannette faced her accusingly.

"That may be," said Lady Varleigh. "But the poor creatures were always in love with me. That makes a difference, you know, dear."

"Well, I think Hugh is—in his own fashion" said Jeannette. "He is quite sure he wants to marry me for myself anyhow. That's something, isn't it?"

"Everything, darling," said Lady Varleigh warmly. "You will find he is your most adoring slave before you are much older. It's no business of Buck's if he isn't."

"No. It's no business of Buck's. I should never have married him in any case. I told him that."

"Quite right, dear. And what did he say?"

Jeannette's delicate face flushed a little. "He gave me to understand that he considered me a fine character ruined by wealth and prosperity, but had the generosity to love me notwithstanding. I was furious of course. And yet—somehow—I wonder if I am anything like that, Lady Varleigh. Do you think so?"

"I, darling? I think you are the sweetest child in the whole world. I would go back and marry them all again

twenty times if I could have you for a daughter," declared Lady Varleigh. "Of course he loves you! He always will. That's why I wondered yesterday— ah, well, you don't, so we won't discuss it. He's a very foolish young man, but then they all are. I shouldn't worry if I were you, Jeannette. You have made your choice, and I don't think there is the smallest likelihood of your regretting it. Bless me, it will be in all the papers inside a week. 'The beautiful Miss Wyngold to wed a peer.' Not that you are beautiful, my dear. Nothing so conventional and commonplace. You are mysterious, fascinating, wonderful; but they have only the one ordinary term to express it all, poor things. Why, they actually called me beautiful once. Just imagine!" She broke into her jolly laugh. "That was when I married young Beachcroft. But there! Don't you fret yourself, Jeannette! We all—or nearly all —go through it at first. It's just feminine nature, and it will pass. You're going to be the happiest woman in the world. Of course you are! And you will ask me to tea with the King! Come! Promise!"

"I will do anything under the sun for you," said Jeannette, clasping her friend's hand warmly. "You know that."

"Bless you, my dear!" said Lady Varleigh. "Now I want you to come back to the very important fact of your twenty-first birthday. I have a little offering for you. I was going to bring you one to-night, but now you have come to me—on your birthday morning—It was very dear of you to come, Jeannette."

"I had to come," said Jeannette.

"Well, come upstairs, dear, and we will have our little presentation ceremony in strict privacy! Sir Philip is in his study. He wants to see you too. But he can wait."

"You shouldn't give me anything," Jeannette said. "I have more than is good for me already."

"Don't be absurd, child! It will give me far more pleasure than it will you," said Lady Varleigh.

"Indeed it won't," said Jeannette.

"Well, come and get it!" said Lady Varleigh.

She linked her arm in Jeannette's, and led her through the old house and up the wide oak stairs to the low raftered room facing south which was her own.

"Now sit down!" she said. "I am going to give you to-day something which I hadn't planned to give you yesterday. I had a present for you of course, and I will bring that along to-night. But this is something different—something rather special—which I give you for luck, because you are engaged."

"What can it be?" Jeannette said.

"It was a love-token, darling. I'll tell you that," said Lady Varleigh. "And I couldn't—possibly—part with it to anyone but you."

"Oh, I don't think you ought to give it to me," said Jeannette.

"Wait!" said Lady Varleigh.

She was bending over an old chest that stood in a corner of the room. Jeannette stood by the open window, gazing out over her favourite view. Varleigh Park had always been her *beau idéal* of a country house. It adjoined the grounds of the Hall, and from where she stood she caught a picturesque glimpse of the latter's ancient tiled roof and quaint chimney-stacks. The two estates had once been one, and Varleigh Park had been the Dower House of the Hall. But times had altered and now Varleigh, purchased by Sir Philip's father from Buck Wetherby's impecunious grandfather, was the greater of the two. The old Hall was in a state of gradual decay, and though its owner did his utmost with

the very limited means at his disposal to save it from total destruction, there was small doubt that it would ere long become uninhabitable.

"Why doesn't he sell it?" said Jeannette suddenly.

"My dear, he won't." Lady Varleigh at once caught the trend of her thoughts. "He is an odd creature—with a family pride equal to Lord Conister's. He says that Wetherbys have always lived there, and so he won't be persuaded to part with another foot of ground—much less the house itself—which goodness knows will be nothing but a scrap-heap in another ten years. Sir Philip has done his best to persuade him to sell the place to him, and then he would pull down the poor rotten old house and add the grounds to Varleigh Park. But he won't hear of it, so there's an end of it. I tell Sir Philip he will have to bequeath Varleigh Park to him if the two places are ever to be united again. Sir Philip has no heir, you know, and unless I die or get myself divorced pretty soon, I'm afraid he never will have. He doesn't seem to want a substitute, however, which is odd, considering the life I lead him. So there we are—nonplussed again. One thing is certain. I shall never divorce Sir Philip. They would all laugh in my face if I were to suggest such a thing." Her own hearty laugh broke forth at the idea, but in a few seconds was hushed. "Now dear, here is my little charm, and I want you to keep it always for my sake. Will you, Jeannette?"

"But what is it?" said Jeannette, in a tone of awe.

Lady Varleigh was holding out on the palm of her hand a peculiar stone cut smooth and shaped like a drop and set at the small end in pale gold. It was deep red in colour, opaque, yet strangely possessed of light.

"What is it?" Jeannette said again. "It is like a crimson pearl."

Lady Varleigh moved her hand, and the strange stone

glimmered as if phosphorescent, gleaming now purple, now pink, and again the deepest black.

"Take it, dear!" said Lady Varleigh. "And watch the colour as it goes from your hand to mine!"

Jeannette held out her hand almost unwillingly, and in a moment the stone rolled into it. It changed into vivid red, and Lady Varleigh uttered a quick breath of relief.

"That's right," she said. "I don't think I would have let you keep it otherwise. That stone is my one and only superstition. It used to be that colour with me once, but —ah me!—I am getting old and faithless. Keep it always, Jeannette! And so long as it remains that colour, remember, all is well. But it always will with you, darling. It always will with you."

"What is it?" said Jeannette for the third time.

"They say it is an opal, but no one seems to have seen anything like it elsewhere. I don't show it to many, Jeannette, and I have never told its history to a single one."

"No?" said Jeannette, with a quick glance upwards from the wonderful thing she held.

Lady Varleigh's dark eyes met hers with an odd little smile of melancholy. "It came from the only man in the world, darling," she said. "That is why it is so sacred. It was given to him as a charm by an old Egyptian hermit whom he found dying in the desert. He did not claim unqualified luck for its possessor, only—'the experience of misfortune which engenders hope.' But it will not bring you misfortune, my darling. Don't be afraid of that, dear! It will bring you—love."

"But why do you part with it?" said Jeannette. "It must be so precious to you."

"I give it to you," said Lady Varleigh, "because I love you, and because I don't want to leave it behind me. It was the only real romance of my life—the one dream that

I shall never forget. It came too late, but it is none the less immortal. I sent him away, Jeannette." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "It was the only big thing I ever did, and it nearly tore my heart out to do it. But it was Love's sacrifice. God knows I did it—for love."

Jeannette's warm young arm slipped round her. The stone still gleamed like a drop of blood in the palm of her hand. She said no word.

Lady Varleigh's hushed voice went on. "We were tied—both of us. And he was years younger than I. To this day I don't know how it happened. We must have belonged to one another in a former state, but by some tragic miscalculation we missed each other in this. He came too late, or I too early. He had a brilliant career—as well as all his other ties. So I sent him away—I sent him away. Afterwards, he sent me—this. He called it a drop of his heart's blood." She stopped, was silent a moment, then resumed in her usual tone. "That's all, Jeannette. He is now one of the most successful men in London. You have heard of him. You have probably met him. It all happened before you were born, so I think I may tell you his name. It is Sir Jervis Kingswold."

"Oh!" said Jeannette. "The great K. C.!"

"Yes, dear. He is a wonderful man. Sometimes—when I am in town—we meet even now, just in the casual way, Jeannette. And we laugh, and we part again, as though—well, as though there had never been that amazing flame kindled between us. His wife disapproves of me—naturally, and detests me—she knows not why. So we don't often meet. Theoretically, it all ended twenty years ago, but ah, Jeannette, what is twenty years in the life of that which cannot die?"

"I never liked the look of Lady Kingswold," said Jeannette. "I don't know either of them to speak to.

But she is a poor puling thing. What ever did he see in her?"

"She was pretty when she was young," said Lady Varleigh. "One of your delicate clinging women that make men feel big and important! The funny creatures!" She began to laugh. "Ah, dear me! They none of them know—or care—what's good for them, but snatch the first shining bauble that takes their fancy. She has given him children anyhow, so there is that to her credit. Now we must find a chain for you, Jeannette. I have a long one that I used to wear it on. See, here it is!"

She held up a long chain, slender as a thread, in pale gold.

"Will you wear it for me?" she said.

"Put it on for me!" said Jeannette. "I will wear it always. She added as Lady Varleigh attached it to the stone and put it about her neck, "But I can't think how you can bear to part with it."

Lady Varleigh kissed her fondly on both cheeks. "I want you to have it, dear. I am getting old, you know. And by means of a little judicious parting of my goods beforehand, I am hoping to be able to afford to die in comfort. I couldn't have borne this to be fingered and valued with the rest, and they would never have buried it with me if I'd been silly enough to ask them to. No, I would rather you had it, and may it bring you joy, darling! Now we will go and see what Sir Philip has to say."

"Tell me one thing!" Jeannette said suddenly, as they turned to go. "Do you think I have been unfair to—Buck—or any of them?"

Lady Varleigh's hearty laugh dismissed all seriousness. "What a question to ask! Of course you haven't been unfair! My dear, nobody can be unfair in this old game. It's just every man for himself and the devil take the

hindmost! I suppose poor Buck is the very last of all."

"Quite," said Jeannette.

"Ah well! We are also told that the last shall be first," said Lady Varleigh. "So he has made an excellent start."

"He will never be that," said Jeannette with decision.

"I used to say the same of Sir Philip," commented Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette broke into an irresistible laugh, hastily checked. "Do forgive me!" she said. "But—you are so funny!"

"My dear, I meant to be funny," protested Lady Varleigh.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE DEED OF SETTLEMENT

Sir Philip Varleigh came from the garden to receive them as they descended. He was a red-faced, thick-set man of sixty-five with a raucous voice and assertive manner which had long since earned for him from his fellow-magistrates the title of "the Master of the Bench."

He received Jeannette now with a somewhat noisy greeting. "Hullo! Hullo! The birthday queen herself! Delighted to see you and to be able to wish you many happy returns. I also wish you the best of luck and every happiness."

"How kind of you!" said Jeannette.

Standing there in the morning sunlight, flushed, smiling, she looked the very incarnation of happiness, and both her friends regarded her with involuntary admiration.

"I said you weren't beautiful," said Lady Varleigh. "But you are—the loveliest girl I have ever seen."

"How ridiculous!" laughed Jeannette.

"Well," said Sir Philip, "I agree; so there's a pair of us. I didn't know you had it in you, Jeannette."

"Is that a compliment?" asked Jeannette.

"It is one of that rare species that bears the hall-mark

of truth," he declared gallantly. "You wear your happiness like a diadem. May its lustre never be dimmed!"

"This is too much!" declared Jeannette. "Won't you save up a little for to-night? I must be going back now or I shall keep my father waiting."

"It is more than good of you to ask the old fogies to your party," said Sir Philip. "I feel as if I am going to attend a coronation."

"Perhaps you are!" laughed Lady Varleigh. "Must you go, Jeannette? Well, good-bye, dear, till to-night! Sir Philip and I may play bridge while you dance, mayn't we?"

"You may do anything you like," said Jeannette generously, "so long as both come. My party won't be complete without you."

She took her leave of them, and went out laughing into the sunshine.

"She is quite wonderful," said Lady Varleigh fondly.

To Jeannette, speeding home again in her car, it seemed as if the world had never looked so bright. She was supremely happy. Her talk with Lady Varleigh had done her good. She felt reassured and satisfied.

She had promised to be back by half-past-eleven, when her father had arranged to execute his deed of gift in the presence of his solicitor.

Hugh would be there too, though he did not know what was going to take place. Her mind dwelt upon Hugh with a certain wistfulness. She was glad—very glad—that he had been ignorant of the magnificent settlement her father was making upon her when he proposed. She looked forward to her next meeting with him with an eagerness that surprised herself. The feeling that she had made her decision at last was a vast relief to her. She was even beginning to wonder tentatively, half-shyly, if perhaps she were to some extent in love with him al-

ready. Her admiration of him was undoubted. His air of high breeding slightly tinged with haughtiness, his handsome presence, his restraint, all had their separate appeal. She could not imagine him losing his self-control for an instant. But yet she was convinced that he cared for her, and she gloried in the thought.

Remembering Lady Varleigh's words at parting, she laughed softly to herself. "Yes, I will be lovely to-night," she said. "I will surprise him."

So happy and so varied were her thoughts that she was at home almost before she realized it. Her guests were scattered far and wide. She was not troubling about them to-day. They would find amusement for themselves until the evening. And then would come the grand ball, her final triumph, and by the end of the evening they would all know that she had made her choice, and that it had fallen upon Lord Conister.

She laughed again to herself, and sprang from her car to find him standing bare-headed on the steps to greet her.

For a moment she was conscious of embarrassment, and a beautiful flood of colour rose in her happy face as she gave him her hand in greeting.

"I didn't think you would be here so soon," she said.

"How long did you think I could keep away?" he said, pressing her fingers close in his own.

She looked up at him, and met the unveiled admiration of his eyes. "Have you been in or have you only just arrived?" she asked, striving to cover the thrill of pleasure that went through her at the sight.

"Oh, I arrived some time ago," he said. "I have been with your father, and we have had a very interesting talk. But I was watching for you the whole time, and as soon as I heard your horn—well," he laughed a little, "I excused myself somewhat summarily, but I think your father understood."

"He always understands," said Jeannette, with a warm glow that was not for the man at her side.

She released her hand with a smile, and turned to ascend the steps. "The windows all have eyes," she said. "And I would like to keep our secret till to-night."

"I wonder why," said Lord Conister.

She would not tell him of the thought in her mind. "It will be such fun," she said. "I like to feel that nobody suspects it yet, except——"

"Except who?" he questioned.

"No one that matters," returned Jeannette briefly. "But they will all know to-night. We will get my father to announce it at supper."

"As you like," he said indulgently. The sooner the better for me. I shall feel the more sure of you. You are very like a bird, Jeannette. I have an urgent desire to clip your wings."

Somehow the simile caused her a passing irritation. "Oh, please don't be silly!" she said. "I am a much more practical being than you imagine. Let us go to my father!"

He detained her in the hall. "Jeannette, I have had no opportunity to offer you my birthday greetings or my gift. When may I see you alone? Will you ride in the woods with me when this is over?"

Again, almost in spite of herself, she was conscious of a thrill. So he wanted her, after all! He wanted to have her alone! There was nothing of the luke-warm lover here. Her eyes fell before the kindling ardour of his look.

"It is getting late," she said. "I would like to come—of course. But I am not sure if there will be time."

"You can make time," he said. "I am sure you are clever enough for that. This afternoon then! Your father has already asked me to lunch."

"He shouldn't have done that without asking me," said Jeannette.

"What would you have said if he had?" challenged the lover.

She shook her head, refusing to answer. There was an air of possession about him with which she found it difficult to cope, but it had a fascination for her which she could not ignore. This was the sort of man she had always secretly wanted—the man who could dominate her without offence and ultimately command her willing submission. Already the primitive woman in her had begun to rejoice at his mastery. She realized that the citadel which she had defended for so long might ere long be compelled to capitulate.

But she had not surrendered it yet; and her pride and natural instinct alike restrained her from lowering her flag without parley. He must understand that though she had promised herself to him, she yet was not wholly his. He must not regard her as his exclusive property before she gave the signal.

So she merely smiled at him, and moved on without committing herself.

He followed with a swiftness she had hardly expected, and at the door of her fathers's room his hand caught hers before it reached the handle. He drew her round to face him.

"Jeannette!"

Half-startled, half-indignant, she made instant resistance, and then, seeing his look of genuine surprise, she uttered a little gasping laugh and yielded. But she did not give him her lips, and he released her almost before his own had touched her cheek.

"Presently!" he said, and with admirable restraint opened the door for her to enter.

She knew that her face was burning, and marvelled

at the composure with which he controlled the situation.

"You desired me to come back, sir," he said to Norman Wyngold, who awaited them on the hearth-rug, looking harassed and almost nervous, "so I have done so. But I think myself that my presence at this ceremony is superfluous, and with your permission I will now withdraw."

"By no means, by no means!" the banker said. "I wish you to be present. And you, Jeannette! Why are you so late, child?"

He looked at her with a faint frown that changed immediately to a smile as she came to him.

"My dear child!" he said fondly, and put his hand through her arm.

The table was littered with papers; he indicated them with a nod.

"I want this thing completed at once. Fothergill is waiting and everything is in readiness." He reached a hand to the bell. "In five minutes now, Jeannette, you will be a woman of property."

She gave him one of her quick glances. The hurried, almost disjointed sentences held something which caught her instant attention. "I am sorry I have kept you waiting, dear," she said, "but I am up to time as I promised. What is it? Are you sending for Mr. Fothergill?"

"Yes," he said. "Fothergill has brought his clerk for a witness. And Buck Wetherby is here too. You don't mind, do you, Jeannette? He is a J. P., and I thought I should like his signature to the document also."

Jeannette's face displayed the faint frown which her father's had worn the moment before. "But why Buck?" she questioned. "I don't understand. Wouldn't Hugh have done?"

"No, no! I want disinterested witnesses. This thing

must be absolutely in order," Wyngold spoke almost irritably. "I won't risk anything. It's too important."

"I can't think it necessary," said Jeannette.

"My dear," her father said, "I know best."

She flushed with annoyance, but said no more. On those rare occasions that Norman Wyngold asserted himself, he was not to be gainsaid.

The old Bentbridge lawyer whom she had known all her life entered the room a few minutes later, followed by his clerk and Buck Wetherby. The latter came straight to Jeannette, but he did not speak until old Mr. Fothergill had offered his birthday greetings. As usual, he awaited his turn.

"It is a most happy occasion," declared Mr. Fothergill, as he bent over Jeannette's hand. "And I am most happy to be permitted to assist at its celebration."

"It's a fearful responsibility for you," laughed Jeannette. "And I am positively overwhelmed with you and two justices of the peace to witness this exciting ceremony."

"But your part is a simple one," protested the lawyer, and turned to bow to Lord Conister as though he had been Royalty.

Then it was Buck's turn. He took her extended hand without bending, and looked her straight in the eyes. "I wish you the very best thing in life," he said.

"And what is that?" said Jeannette flippantly.

He smiled at her, but his eyes remained unchanged; they almost seemed to be looking into the future. "The unknown quantity, Jeannette," he said. "There are different names for it, but most people call it just—happiness."

"How dull!" said Jeannette scathingly.

"It depends what you mean by the word," said Buck.

He passed on in his quiet fashion to greet Lord Conister. There was not the faintest trace of chagrin in his bearing, and for this also Jeannette found it hard to pardon him. She told herself that his air of patronage was insufferable.

She wished that her father had not insisted upon so much formality, but her vexation passed like a cloud when he drew her forward and signed the deed of settlement with her hand closely held in his. For the pressure of his fingers told her that he was deeply moved.

When he rose, he drew her to him and kissed her with solemnity before them all. "Whatever happens to me now," he said, "you are a woman of property, Jeannette, and this money which I have just settled upon you, none but yourself can ever touch without your consent."

"That sounds very irrevocable," laughed Jeannette.

Again the sense of tragedy was upon her, and she sought to lift it by all the means in her power. She would have checked any demonstration of affection at that moment had she been able, for it seemed to betray a certain weakness on her father's part to which she was little accustomed. She tried to turn the matter off with a jest; but it rang false even to herself. She was sure that Buck thought her very heartless.

Almost in desperation she turned to her *fiancé*. "Well, Lord Conister, I hope you are duly impressed," she said. "I assure you I am. I feel exactly as if I am up for sentence. Please pass a light one!"

He smiled at her as he had smiled in the hall, making her aware of the admiration he would not put into mere words.

"I trust you will consider it as such," he said. "My sentence is that you shall redeem your promise of yesterday, and ride with me to-day."

She nodded. "Yes. I will do that.. You are staying

to lunch? Good! I will ride with you immediately afterwards."

Somehow the few light words relieved the situation. She felt that the tension was over. She patted her father's arm and turned away. What did it matter what Buck thought, after all? Was not the look in her lover's eyes enough?

## CHAPTER X

### THE RIDE IN THE WOODS

They rode out together later into the gold of the autumn woods, and it came to Jeannette as they went that it was the most wonderful day she had ever known. He was very gentle with her and displayed a marvellous understanding of her mood. Not once did he seek to force the barrier of her reserve.

They passed through silent moss-grown rides together and by little-frequented tracks till they came to a steep rise that led to a grassy knoll from which the distant towers of Culverley could be discerned, mellow in the afternoon sunlight. And here by mutual consent they checked their horses and sat for a few moments in silence.

The man spoke at length. "Jeannette, your father has given you much to-day, but I hope that I shall give you very much more."

The quiet sincerity of the words moved her, though she said no word in answer.

He waited a second or two, and then proceeded. "After to-night I shall be able to claim you openly as my own. May I give you my ring now, and ask you to wear it for me when the time comes?"

She turned towards him, stirred by an impulse for

which she could not wholly account. "Not now," she said. "Please not now! Let us wait till to-night! Do you mind?"

He met her look gravely. "Whatever you wish shall always be done," he said.

She gave him her hand with an odd feeling of relief. "Thank you," she said.

He kept it in his own. "Jeannette, you need never have any anxiety or misgiving over expressing your wishes to me on any subject. It will be my privilege always to see that they are carried out. Your happiness means a great deal to me, and it will be my first care to secure it."

"Thank you," she said again, and wished unreasonably that she could feel anew the brief uncertainty that had thrilled her a little earlier.

"You know you can trust me for that, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," said Jeannette.

"And are you happy?" he asked her gently.

She frowned momentarily. "Yes, I think so. I really don't quite know yet. It's such a new experience, isn't it?"

"But you wouldn't have it otherwise?" he said.

"Oh no! I don't want it any different," said Jeannette.

He smiled and released her hand. "To-night, Jeannette, to-night, when we are formally and publicly engaged, I shall ask you for that kiss that you have twice denied me."

She felt her colour rise. "Not publicly, I hope," she said, with a little laugh.

"No, not publicly certainly." He laughed with her. "But I am not going to be put off much longer. It can't be done, Jeannette."

"Can't it?" said Jeannette, and wondered again oddly within herself why he delayed to take what he wanted.

She turned her horse, and they began to descend the slope.

"I want you to come over to Culverley one day soon," said Lord Conister. "We will go through it together, and you must choose your rooms and decide how you will have them arranged."

"I shall enjoy that," said Jeannette.

He smiled approval. "So shall I, my dear. The old place needs renovating. It is getting almost as delapidated as the Hall." He looked at her. "Do you know, Jeannette, I used to think that you would eventually make up your mind to reign there?"

"Really!" said Jeannette. "I wonder why."

Her tone expressed annoyance; the faint frown drew her brows.

"Is it very surprising?" Lord Conister asked "Wetherby's devotion to you is fairly obvious, it is not?"

"But not mine to him!" protested Jeannette. "No one can ever say they have seen the slightest sign of that!"

"Oh, well!" He smiled again. "No one ever aspires to read a woman's mind. This time yesterday I had no idea what was going on in yours."

"This time yesterday!" repeated Jeannette, and paused with a sense of shame. This time yesterday she and Lady Varleigh had been reviewing her list of suitors, turning down this one and discussing that, as though they had been articles to be bought at a shop. She coloured again at the remembrance. But at least she had never hesitated for one moment about turning down Buck. He had always been the first to be rejected.

"You must have known I would never marry Buck Wetherby," she said, after a moment. "He has nothing whatever to recommend him."

"I am afraid I don't agree with you there," said Lord Conister, with somewhat unexpected firmness. "To my mind, he is everything that a woman could possibly wish for—except wealthy, and that, I imagine, could hardly weigh with you."

Jeannette threw him a swift glance. The grave declaration amazed her, and she resented it instantly and very forcibly.

"To my mind," she returned, with brief disdain, "he is the dullest person I have ever met. One would forget his existence immediately if only he were not always there."

"You surprise me," said Lord Conister. "It is Buck we are talking about, isn't it? Not Bandy?"

"Oh, Bandy!" She laughed scornfully. "Bandy is positively light relief in comparison with Buck. You can't say—you can't pretend to think—that Buck is in the faintest degree an interesting man!"

There was a moment's silence, and she was aware that her companion drew himself up in the saddle before he replied. Then he spoke, and she heard a note of displeasure in his voice.

"No, Jeannette! I do not pretend in word or thought. My honest opinion of Wetherby is that he is one of the finest men I have ever met, and I think the woman who marries him will be—extremely lucky."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Jeannette. "If she has any brains, she'll die of boredom in a fortnight. He is the most conventional prig I know."

"I wish there were more like him," said Lord Conister. "He is upright, sporting, and extraordinarily faithful. And I say again," he spoke with warmth, "that he is all a good woman could ask for—more, far more, than most ever obtain."

"I seem to have missed something," said Jeannette.

His look came to her, and his face softened. "One man's loss is another man's gain," he said. "The choice was yours, Jeannette, and I tell you plainly you might have chosen better. But—you shall never regret it if it lies with me."

His words impressed her in spite of herself, but she refused to take them seriously.

"Everyone is so tragic to-day," she said. "I can't think why. Is it because it is my birthday or because I am engaged to be married? Do let us stop these unprofitable discussions and enjoy ourselves!"

She struck her animal smartly with the words, and in a moment was galloping across the broad stretch of turf that lay between them and Starfields. And as she went, she knew that she was angry—furiously angry—though whether with Buck or Hugh or herself, it was impossible to say. On the whole, she was inclined to lay the blame on Buck.

As chance would have it, she met him face to face at the very entrance to her father's grounds, but she swept past him without a glance. In that moment she would gladly have foregone all the gaieties and triumphs that awaited her, if only she could have barred him out of the house.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE WHITE ROSE

"YES, I think I shall surprise him to-night," said Jeannette.

She stood before the long glass in her room ready dressed for the ball and looked straight at her own reflection with searching, critical eyes. Frankly, she was a little surprised herself at the brilliant picture before her. Like Lady Varleigh, she had never believed herself beautiful; but there was no denying the existence of beauty to-night, and beauty of a very arresting nature. The flushed face and sparkling eyes, the red lips and shining even teeth, the soft hair exquisitely arranged about the small, dainty head, all were perfect in their way. And the wonderful vitality of her was like a light that glowed from within. There was nothing tragic or haunting about her to-night. She stood—a very figure of triumph—ready to descend and receive the homage that awaited her.

Yet, "Pshaw!" she exclaimed suddenly, and swung upon her heel. "Who wouldn't look beautiful in this array?"

She was clad in what might have been the bridal robe of a queen—a dress of amazing skill and still more amazing simplicity,—its only ornament a long rope of pearls

which her father had given her earlier in the day. She carried a little jewelled fan also which Lady Varleigh had sent by messenger that afternoon. But, except for a slender string of pearls in her hair which had once belonged to her mother, she had no other adornments. Yet she was lovely from head to foot, a vision of glorious youth, exulting in life.

She wore no rings, and as she turned aside she looked down curiously at her left hand and wondered what dazzling emblem it would be wearing before the end of the evening. A riotous sense of well-being came over her. Yes, she was happy in spite of all gloomy prognostications from disappointed lovers. She would be happy always. She meant to be happy.

There came her maid's low knock at the door.

"Come in, Marie!" she called.

The girl entered, bearing an exquisite spray of white flowers—gardenias and lilies, all fragrant and luscious from their hothouse, and in the centre one splendid snow-white rose.

"From the Hall," said Marie.

She stood considerably awed of her young mistress, or she would have uttered rhapsodies of delight. Jeannette took the flowers with an exclamation of pleasure. They were from Hugh of course! And how exquisite —how adorable—they were! She loved him for the thought. Then sharply the maid's words recurred to her. She lifted her face from the flowers.

"Not from the Hall!" she said. "They are from Culverley."

"I was told—from the Hall, mademoiselle," persisted Marie, looking back at her with slight nervous curiosity. "There is a note with them, if mademoiselle will look."

Jeannette looked, and found a slip of paper attached to the stems of the flowers. She unfastened and opened it out. Standing under the flaring light above her dressing-table, she read the few words it contained—words such as Hugh would never have written.

"Will you deign to wear these? They were grown for you and are not unworthy—if you can forget the giver in the gift. B. W."

She looked up, and met her own blazing eyes in the glass. Her face was white, the red lips very closely compressed.

For a few seconds she stood so, quite motionless, then briefly, "You can go," she said over her shoulder to Marie.

The girl fled as if from a rebuke.

Then Jeannette drew a long hard breath and picking up a little gold match-box from her table lighted a candle that stood above an ash-tray. From that she kindled the slip of paper, laid it down, and watched it burn. Then she picked up the flowers—his flowers that were not unworthy of her! The stems hissed and refused to burn. With a furious movement she flung them on the floor and trod them underfoot. Not unworthy of her! Did he really think that she would stoop to wear his flowers?

Then, looking down, she saw the white rose, pure and splendid, still untouched among the crushed bells of the lilies. A curious little spasm that was like a shudder went through her. She stooped, pulled out the rose, and tossed the other flowers aside. As she did so, the strange stone that Lady Varleigh had given her fell out from its resting-place and dangled at the end of its long chain from her neck. She picked it up to thrust it back into her bosom, but stood suddenly still, gazing as it lay in her hand. In the strong, downward-flung electric light, it shone black as ink.

For a moment or two she remained motionless, not even breathing. Then, "Pshaw!" she exclaimed, and straightening herself dropped it back into its hiding-place. It sent a little chill through her as it went.

She glanced again at the perfect rose in her hand, then opened a drawer and dropped it within.

Again for an instant her eyes met the eyes in the glass, but she averted them quickly as if ashamed, and turned to leave the room.

She opened the door somewhat suddenly, and then started at the sight of her father on the threshold.

She uttered a quick sound of surprise, though it was not his presence that evoked it, but his attitude and look. For he was standing half-turned from her, almost as if he were summoning his strength to enter her presence. And his face had the haggard drawn look that had begun to trouble her of late.

"Why, Father!" she said. "Were you coming in? What is it?"

He met her eyes and smiled, but his smile was ghastly. "Yes, dear, yes! I wanted to see my girl in all her fine feathers before anyone else looks at her."

She put out both her hands to him with a gesture that was inexpressibly tender. "Come in, dearest!" she said.

He entered, and she closed the door and faced him, holding him by the arms.

"Father darling," she said, "I want you—please—to give me a promise."

"I will give you anything within my power," he said.

She shook her head. "It's nothing for myself. You have given me far more than enough. But I want you, darling, to promise me that the very day after everyone leaves, you will throw everything aside and come away with me."

His gaze dwelt upon her with a strange intentness. "What about Hugh?" he said. "Are you going to leave him so soon?"

She frowned a little. "Don't be absurd! What does he matter—beside you? Please promise me this, Father! It will make me so much happier if you will."

He moved and drew her very gently into his arms. "I will promise to do anything in my power for your happiness always, my darling," he said. "Now let me hold you for a minute, my own beautiful girl, and feel you are my very own before I have to share you with all the world downstairs!"

He drew her closer, feasting his eyes upon her with the expression of a man who gazes upon a treasure fondly loved which will not long be his.

Again she felt that sense of tragedy, unknown but very definite, and again she did battle with it.

"Do let us be happy to-night!" she pleaded. "Honestly, darling, I'd break my engagement at once if it makes you unhappy. I would rather—far rather."

He kissed her tenderly, very lingeringly. "My darling child," he said, "your engagement is the one thing I desire above all others. I could wish—I could even wish —that you were to be married to-night."

"Then what's the matter?" said Jeannette.

He sighed heavily and released her. "Nothing that you can ever remedy, my darling. I am getting old—and tired. Things weigh on me—trouble me—more than they used. I am glad to think you are of age and a woman of property. Nothing matters now. Nothing can matter. I can lay down my work if I must, and feel that with you at least—all is well."

"It couldn't be with me if it were not with you, dear," said Jeannette. "If you are ill or sad, do you think I can possibly be happy?"

He made a curious movement almost as if she had pierced him. "You will get over it," he said. "You will be married and have your own interests. It isn't good for the children to cling too close to the parents. It isn't nature. We must pass on, Jeannette. We must all pass on. When you have children of your own, you will understand."

"Oh, don't talk to me like that!" said Jeannette. "It may be so with most people. It could never be so with us. We are too much to one another for that." She reached up and clasped his neck with the words; her eyes were lifted to his, starry in their brightness but still with that mysterious shadow within them which Lady Varleigh described as "secret." "We shall always belong to one another," she said. "One of us may die and the other live on, but the tie will last for ever. In life or in death, you will always hold the one end and I the other. But, Father—but, Father——"

She broke off in dismay, for suddenly his look had changed. He bowed his head with its gleaming, silvery hair and sobbed aloud upon her shoulder. "You will be glad to forget me," he said.

Horrified, she held him, pouring out soft, loving words, in her consternation hardly knowing what she said; and in a few seconds he had mastered himself again.

He stood up, summoning his self-control. "What a selfish brute!" he said, and smiled again at her with immense effort. "And on your birthday night! Forgive me, my Jeannette! I have been working too hard, as you say, and I haven't slept very well lately. But don't be anxious! I shall be all right. Am I forgiven?"

She saw the strain in his eyes and met it characteristically, though in its way her effort was as great as his. "Oh, don't be ridiculous!" she said. "You are very

wrong to tire yourself out, and I won't forgive you, there!"

"You won't forgive me?" he said, with a wistfulness that went to her heart.

She clasped his arm in both her hands and gave it a tight squeeze. "I will forgive you anything, my own daddy," she said, "except the crime of not taking care of yourself. That is the one unforgivable offence. Do you understand?"

"Ah, child!" he said, and bent again to kiss her. "God knows what I have done to deserve a daughter like you."

"Perhaps we both have something to be thankful for," said Jeannette practically. "Now tell me! Am I all right —fit to be seen?"

"Let me look at you!" He stood back and surveyed her. "Yes, you are perfect, dear, perfect; except—yes, just one thing! Why are you wearing no flowers?"

She made a face. "I didn't want any. They get in one's way,—especially dancing. And I am going to dance a lot to-night."

He still looked at her critically. "I would like you to wear flowers, Jeannette. Just one flower—in your hair. Can't you manage that for me? Is it too late?"

She laughed and turned impulsively to her dressing-table. "Yes, dear. I can manage that for you—if you wish it." She opened her drawer and took out the white rose. "Will this do?"

His face lighted. "The very thing, dear! Just what I should have chosen for you. Where did it come from? But I needn't ask! Put it in your hair, Jeannette! It was your mother's favourite flower."

He stood by while she arranged it in the soft brown waves, and when it was done he took her in his arms.

"Jeannette," he said, and his voice shook, "I am not a good man, but I would like you to know that to-night—

all the time—all the time—I am asking God to bless and keep my darling."

"Thank you, Father," said Jeannette, and lifted her face for his final kiss ere they left the room together.

## CHAPTER XII

### SMOKE FROM THE FIRE

They went downstairs together and received their guests side by side. No one who saw them standing there laughing and jesting could have suspected the heaviness of the man's heart and the anxiety of the girl's. The scene was a very brilliant one, and Jeannette shone at its centre—a jewel in a perfect setting. She was exquisite that night, as Audrey Wilmot, the doctor's daughter, little Valerie West, and her sporting cousin, Daphne Somers, known as "the polo-girl" all agreed. But it was not so much her beauty as her amazing charm that made her so.

The arrival of Lady Varleigh, ugly but regal, in a dress of black and gold, caused something of a sensation; for she took up her stand close to Jeannette with almost a fighting air and refused to be drawn away upon any pretext.

"I must be near you to-night, darling," she said, and when Lord Conister arrived she engaged him in a conversation that frankly excluded everyone else. But then Lady Varleigh was Lady Varleigh and did as she liked everywhere, in spite of Sir Philip's blustering attempts upon occasion to keep her in order.

But if Lady Varleigh's arrival excited the public interest and was certainly too important to be overlooked by anyone, there was another guest whose entrance was so unobtrusive that he might almost have been said to have got there without arriving.

Quite suddenly Jeannette turned from delivering some gay repartee to find Buck, ("so called because he never does!" as his younger brother, Skittles, once said of him) standing close to her. She did not start at the sight of him, for she was never startled by the appearance of Buck at any time; but she was for the moment surprised, even faintly disconcerted.

She gave him her hand with a brilliant and wholly impersonal smile of greeting. "How do you do? Thank you for your flowers. I am wearing the rose, you see. It was really too fine a specimen to throw away."

"Thank you," said Buck. "I hope it might be."

His grey eyes, direct and friendly, looked straight into hers. They held no reproach, neither did she detect in them any excuse of admiration. A little throb of impatience went through her. How dull he was! She felt an irrepressible longing to taunt him with it.

"I had no idea you numbered rose-growing among your accomplishments," she said. "And how do you time them to come out on a given date?"

He smiled at that. "I just encourage them or restrain them, as the case may be. It's all a matter of training."

"How clever of you!" scoffed Jeannette.

"I am glad you think so," said Buck.

"Would you like to know what I really think?" said Jeannette.

He continued to smile, pleasantly, somewhat conventionally. "I do know," he said. "And I am glad the rose came out in time."

Jeannette turned from him, feeling dangerous. He did not go away, though it was obvious that he expected no more of her attention. He was content, as ever, to remain in her proximity, however marked her disdain. That he could understand her wearing of his rose she knew was impossible, but—this was the intolerable part of him—it did not matter what she said or did, his attitude remained the same. He asked nothing of her. He merely held his ground, unaware apparently of the fact that he was unwelcome. But she had not forgotten his words of the night before. He was the rebel in her camp.

The coming of her *fiancé* to her side diverted her thoughts from him. She realized that the first dance had begun, and very gladly she went with him. At the door she glanced back and saw that Lady Varleigh had joined Buck and was talking to him with a good deal of earnestness, and she had a passing wonder as to the subject of their talk.

"You are very serious to-night," Lord Conister said to her presently. "Is anything troubling you?"

She met his grave look with a smile. Even to her accepted lover she could not speak of her father's strange breakdown, though the memory of it lay like a weight upon her spirit.

"Surely I have a good deal to make me serious!" she said lightly. "I shall have to face the music at supper. Do you realize that?"

"Yes, but I shall be there," he said. "You won't feel shy or nervous with me beside you."

She laughed. "I really don't know what I shall feel. You see I have never done this sort of thing before."

He smiled at her. "And when it is over—" he said, "when I have you to myself——"

He left the sentence unfinished, for her quick flush

showed him that she understood. She averted her face, and he felt the tremor that passed through her.

"Shall we go and sit down?" he said.

"Oh no!" she said instantly. "Oh no! We will play the game—we must play the game—till supper. Besides, I must keep an eye on things till then—make sure that they are all enjoying themselves."

"Lady Varleigh will do that for you," he said.

But she shook her head. "No one can do that for me. No, no! I must keep within sight. I might be wanted."

"No one wants you as much as I do," he said. "Do you know you are wonderful to-night, Jeannette,—simply wonderful!"

"Am I?" whispered Jeannette.

She kept her face turned from him as they danced. Perhaps she hesitated to let him see the triumphant gladness that his words awaked in her. She knew that she was wonderful, and she had made herself so for him alone.

"Shall I tell you what I like best about you?" he went on. "I am glad you are wearing white this evening. It was the most becoming thing you could have chosen."

Becoming! Somehow the word jarred. It was so conventional, almost banal.

"I am glad you think so," she returned, and wondered if he realized that she was being prim.

"I do like it," he said. "You are innocence incarnate to-night, Jeannette. Your simplicity is exquisite, charming."

Jeannette laughed a little. If he could have known what that simplicity of hers had cost!

He went on, still speaking softly, for her alone. "But what I love best about you, sweetheart,—far, far best—is that perfect rose in your hair. That was a wonderful thought, Jeannette. It is so completely typical of you."

"Is it?" said Jeannette. Her laughter died. She was silent for a moment or two. Then, somewhat bluntly, "That was Buck's gift," she said.

"What?" he said in surprise. "Whose gift?"

"Buck's," repeated Jeannette. "Buck Wetherby's."

"Indeed!" said Lord Conister, disapproval barely disguised in his tone.

She turned her vivid face to him, and gave him a darting glance. "I thought at first it came from you," she said, "and then when I found it only came from Buck —well, I hadn't the heart to throw it away on that account."

His look comprehended her, and his displeasure waned. "You are a strange girl, Jeannette," he said, and added a moment later, "I am sorry that I did not send you flowers, but I was afraid you would consider it premature, and so I refrained."

"I daresay I should have," said Jeannette, with deliberate insincerity. "You are not such an old friend as Buck. A gift of that sort means nothing—from him."

"It probably means everything to him, poor chap," said Lord Conister. "You are not—trifling with him, Jeannette?"

"Good heavens!" said Jeannette, and laughed again. "If turning him down consistently from that very first moment I met him is trifling, then I have trifled with him most perseveringly during the whole of our acquaintance."

"I see," said Lord Conister very gravely.

They danced on through the happy crowd, speaking but little after that. The weight still pressed upon Jeannette's spirit though she did her utmost to shake it off. She was conscious of an almost desperate desire to drink deep of her cup of joy that night, for she knew—as most of us know in our secret hearts—that the sparkling draught

would not long be within her reach. Other things perhaps—even that thing which Buck called happiness, and at which she had scoffed—but the rapture of first love in its dawning, never again.

Swiftly the magic evening began to slip away. She left her *fiancé* after that first dance and went to and fro among her guests, making it her personal care to see that none were neglected or ill at ease. For that was Jeannette's way and one of the secrets of her popularity. She never completely relinquished her responsibilities as hostess, even to so practised a woman of the world as Lady Varleigh. It was her business in her father's house to see to the welfare of his guests, and she never suffered herself to forget it.

Half-way through the programme, she danced with Skittles, and found him as usual full of daring and mischief.

"I am going to propose to you to-night," he declared. "It's not an atom of good trying to stop me. You are so intoxicatingly lovely that I am driven to it—in spite of myself. Jeannette, if you are not secretly engaged to Buck already, do be engaged to me!"

"I am certainly not engaged to Buck!" she declared with warmth.

"No?" Skittles surveyed her with the glint of mockery in his eyes that was never long absent. "Somehow I thought I'd seen that rose before—or one just like it—floating in Buck's bedroom jug!"

She knew that she coloured, was furiously aware that he noticed it, but kept her temper. For what was the use of being angry with Skittles who was no more than a mischievous schoolboy, and quite proof against her indignation, moreover?

"Yes," she said calmly. "You are quite right. Buck did send the rose, but I am wearing it—as I have told

him—simply because it is too fine to throw away. If even you had sent it to me, I should probably have done the same."

"For the same reason?" said Skittles.

"Exactly so," said Jeannette.

"Oh, thanks—awfully," said Skittles and laughed aloud. "I didn't think you had it in you to be as appreciative as that."

"One never knows," said Jeannette.

She laughed with him, yet somehow the echo of his laughter stung her a little. He had made her realize that he had no intention of being hurt, and though she did not wish to hurt him, it was humiliating to find him invulnerable, armed as it were to the teeth against her.

"So you won't be engaged to me!" he said. "Not even for half-an-hour?"

"Not even for half-a-minute," said Jeannette.

"Then there must be somebody else," said Skittles with conviction.

She gave him her swift challenging glance. "What makes you think so?"

"I am sure of it," he said. "I have an inner sense—an instinct—that you will get engaged to-night."

"Why to-night?" said Jeannette.

"Because you are so wonderful that we shall all ask you in turn, and you are sure to have included the lucky man among your birthday devotees. When he asks you —" he stopped abruptly—"perhaps he has asked you already. I say, does Buck know?"

She caught a note of actual concern in his voice, and, though she laughed with gay inconsequence, it moved her.

"I hope you won't all propose to-night," she said. "It would be monotonous, and I want some fun. Why

are you so solicitous about Buck, I wonder? Can't he take care of himself?"

Skittles answered her for the first time with sincerity. "Because the silly chap has been looking simply suicidal to-day, and I wondered why. Is it that?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Jeannette.

The music was quickening to a finish, and she was glad of it. Somehow she did not find Skittles as amusing as usual, and though he was undoubtedly the best dancer in the room, she had not greatly enjoyed her dance with him.

"Well, time's up!" said Skittles. "Thank you for dancing with me—even though you wouldn't be engaged. I know how to appreciate small mercies, and if you should ever feel inclined to re-consider your decision on that other point——"

"Oh, but I never re-consider," said Jeannette.

She left him with her hard little smile a few moments later, pleading duty as an excuse, and went in search of her father whom she had not seen for some time.

She looked in vain for him in the card-room, where Lady Varleigh threw her a loving smile from her card-table, and passed on again quickly knowing that the time at her disposal was short.

She went thence straight to the study, and entered it almost as one seeking refuge. It wanted but another half-hour to the time fixed for supper when the great announcement was to be made, and instead of revelling in the joy of anticipation, she was feeling nervous and uneasy, conscious even of a vague desire to postpone the wonderful moment. Perhaps she was tired or perhaps a little satiated with the admiration that was being poured out to her, but, notwithstanding her utmost effort, she could not feel wholly and completely happy that night.

She heard a quick movement as she entered, and knew

that her father was there. The sharp shutting of a drawer directed her eyes to his writing-table as she came forward, and she found him sitting before it, turning over some papers in front of him. An odd suspicion that he was trying to divert her attention from something came upon her as she advanced. The smile with which he greeted her had something almost furtive about it.

"Father!" she said reproachfully. "You are working on my birthday night!"

He got up from his chair and met her. "I didn't expect to be caught," he said. "Why are you not dancing the night away?"

"I made an excuse to come and find you," she said. "I wanted to be sure that you were all right."

"But of course I am all right!" he said.

Yet there was something about him—a something quite indefinable—that belied his words. His smile baffled her. She felt it to be a mask.

He saw her doubt and tried to set her mind at rest. "You mustn't worry about me, my dear," he said. "I only came in here for a little rest before the ordeal of supper. Run along, and leave me to smoke my pipe in peace!"

He picked it up with the words, and began to fill it from a jar on the table. She came and stood beside him. And—for the first time in her life—she became strongly aware of the fact that he wished her gone. A little stab of pain went through her. Was their comradeship already waning before this newer and greater thing that was coming into her life? She set her teeth. It should never do so if it rested with her.

She slipped her hand inside his arm. "Come and dance with me!" she coaxed. "Just once, darling! It would please me so much."

He looked down into her vivid face, and she saw all the old tenderness in his eyes—that look which was for her alone—as he did so.

"And what would your next partner say?" he said. "No, dear, no! Run back again and do your duty! I promise I will do mine when the time comes."

She saw that he meant what he said, and she pressed him no further. With a smile for him and a twinge of disappointment at her heart, she turned away.

"Perhaps—after supper, dear!" he said as she reached the door. And then quickly, "You are enjoying yourself, Jeannette?"

"Why, of course!" she said. "Of course! It's the most perfect evening of my life. Don't be late for supper! Remember, you promised!"

"I shall remember," he said.

She threw him a kiss and departed.

But the smile faded instantly from her face as she closed the door between them. Her anxiety came down upon her with irresistible force. Something was wrong. She was beginning to be certain that something was wrong.

She wished Lady Varleigh was not playing bridge, for she would have given much for her friend's counsel at that moment. But she knew she was inaccessible. Moreover, she herself was engaged for the next dance to Captain Friar, and she did not want to disappoint him.

The interval between the dances was still not quite over, however, and, glad of the short respite, she turned down the passage from her father's room and mounted a secondary staircase that led up to the first floor.

She guessed that she would meet no one in this direction, and on the top stair which gave access to a small corridor leading to the main upper landing, she sat down for a moment to rest.

It was the first time that she had squarely faced the vague misgiving that had been troubling her all day, but there was scant comfort to be gained by doing so, for she was completely in the dark as to its cause. She only knew that something was wrong. Her father was hiding something from her. It might be bad health or some other trouble. He was doubtless doing it from a motive of unselfishness, utterly mistaken though it was; and if so, he would probably tell her everything when her birthday celebrations and the excitement of her engagement were passed. But she did not want to wait. She was not a child to be humoured and indulged and spared all pain, and it hurt her to be treated as such. Hitherto he had taken her into his confidence in all things, and she had taken a loving pride in his trust. The consciousness that he was hiding something from her—even though she was convinced that it was his love for her that prompted him to do so—wounded her very deeply.

The sound of voices talking in the corridor reached her as she sat, and a sudden hot impatience arose within her. She yearned to dismiss all her guests, to put a summary end to the festivities, and then to go and hold the silvered head against her heart and coax him to tell her everything. After all, was he not the only being in the world who really mattered?

She suppressed the preposterous impulse with a grim smile of self-ridicule. The conventions must be observed at whatever cost. These crowds were here to do her honour, and she must carry through the farce with that brilliance and graciousness for which she was famed. It behooved her to don a mask and hide the gnawing anxiety at her heart. No one must guess for a single moment that she was not in the seventh heaven of happiness.

Curiously, in that instant the thought of Buck came

to her,—Buck with his far-seeing eyes. Would she manage to deceive him also? She got to her feet with a little shrug. Pshaw! What did he matter? It was sheer waste of time to think of him.

From below came the sound of the tuning of instruments. The music was about to start again. She turned along the passage in order to descend by the main staircase to the hall where doubtless her partner would come in search of her. And as she did so, she heard a man's voice speaking on the wide landing in front of her, speaking confidently yet very distinctly, so that almost instinctively she paused.

"There's many a concern gone smash before now which was considered as safe as the Bank of England. You never know till the thing happens and you lose your last bean. There may be nothing in it of course, but rumours must have some beginning. No smoke without some fire, you know. If I had any money in Wyngold's, I'd draw it out to-morrow."

A woman's voice made answer—it was the voice of Daphne Somers. "Oh, what rot, Bandy! How can you talk such unmitigated drivel? Wyngold's *is* as safe as the Bank of England. Everyone knows that. I wouldn't waste my time listening to such silly rumours if I were you."

"Daresay you wouldn't," said Bandy. "But forewarned is forearmed sometimes. I wouldn't care to say there was nothing in it. Funny if the old bird went broke. Wonder what Jeannette would do."

"She would probably do what she can't be bothered to do now—marry!" said Daphne Somers practically. "It would be quite a chance for some of you."

"She'd never look at a chap without any money," said Bandy gloomily, "after the life she has had."

"Well, cheer up!" said Daphne. "It's the last thing

that's likely to happen, and you wouldn't get her in any case. Ah, there's the next dance beginning! Let's go!"

They went, and the girl who had stood waiting in the darkness of the passage came slowly forth and watched them descend. Her face wore a very curious expression, the red lips tightly closed and the pointed chin uplifted as though she challenged fate. But in her eyes—those strange eyes with their wild-bird look—there hung a shadow that belied defiance. She stood still as a statue in the full glare of the landing for many seconds ere she turned at length and quietly descended the crimson-carpeted stairs.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE STRANGERS

She looked like a bride in her pure white dress, and Jack Friar, awaiting her in the hall below, came to greet her with kindled eyes. But for the moment she seemed unaware of him. She even made as if she would pass him by.

He spoke then, blurting out his claim in sheer surprise. "Miss Wyngold! This is our dance! You're not looking for someone else, are you?"

She saw him then and smiled upon him, the shadow melting from her eyes. "Of course not! I am sorry I am late. Don't let us waste any more time!"

They went side by side to the ball-room whence the strains of the latest waltz came with alluring sweetness, and began to dance.

But when they had gone once round the room Jeannette spoke with sudden decision. "I'm sorry. I am not in the mood. Let us sit out!"

"With pleasure," said Captain Friar.

It was what he himself had desired but had not dared to suggest from the moment that he had seen her on the stairs. They left the ball-room together, and at Jeannette's suggestion sat down in an alcove that was curtained off from the hall.

"I can see all that happens from here," she said. "I like to be sure that all is going well."

"Could anything do otherwise under your management?" said Captain Friar.

The question did not gratify her and she scarcely smiled in answer. She had always thought with kindness of Jack Friar, but to-night he seemed to her stereotyped, even banal. She paid no attention at all to his next remarks, her mind too deeply engrossed to catch their drift. And then quite abruptly she awoke to the fact that he had asked her something which really demanded a reply, that he was waiting with obvious expectancy for her response, and that she had not the vaguest idea as to what he had said.

She turned and looked at him, and saw from his expression that he had spoken earnestly and was in considerable anxiety as to her answer.

"What is it?" she said. "I'm so sorry. It's that stupid music that puts everything out of my head."

His expression changed to one of solicitude. "You're tired," he said. "You do too much. I've been thinking so all along. You want someone to look after you."

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Jeannette practically. "I look after myself and nothing ever goes wrong with me."

"But you are tired to-night," he asseverated. "I can see it."

"I suppose that means I am looking very ugly," said Jeannette.

He started as if she had struck him. "You!" he said. "As if you could! You are always beautiful. And to-night more so than ever. Do you know you are like a bride to-night? Did you mean to look like a bride?"

"Of course I didn't!" said Jeannette.

He leaned towards her ardently. His red, cheery face was almost beseeching. "I have never seen anyone so lovely as you in the whole of my life," he said. "I have been wanting to tell you so all the evening. You are exquisite, and I love you more than I can possibly say. You don't mind my telling you that?"

"I think it is a great pity," said Jeannette.

She had recovered herself now, and she was prepared to deal with the situation firmly. It was really rather too bad of Jack Friar to be so headlong. She had hardly expected it of him. Of course she had known that he loved her, but she had not expected a declaration without any encouragement, and she had not been even kind to Jack for the past twenty-four hours. It simply meant that the wonderful charm which she had achieved that night had made him lose his head. She was conscious of a faint feeling of annoyance. If he had only waited half-an-hour she would have been spared this trying scene.

"Why is it a pity?" he questioned. "Is it quite impossible for you ever to care for me? I'm not much of a fellow, I know. But I'd die for you—cheerfully—any day."

That softened her. She had heard it before, but never with such absolute and convincing sincerity as now.

"Please," she said gently, "I am very sorry, but you mustn't go on. I know you mean all you say, and if—well, if there wasn't someone else I might be tempted to listen to you. But——"

She stopped, for he groaned and covered his face.

There fell a strained silence that lasted for several seconds before he looked up, and then she saw with pity and compunction that the pleasant ruddiness had gone out of his face, and his features were drawn and lined.

He spoke, forcing the old note of jollity into his voice

with an effort. "I say, what a pity I didn't know before; It's that young fellow at the Hall, isn't it? I like the look of him immensely. I hope you'll be awfully happy."

Jeannette sprang to her feet. For the moment she was really angry. Buck again! Why did they all push Buck at her when she would have none of him? Impatient words were on her lips, but she checked them. After all, it was not his fault. They would all know better very soon.

She held out her hand to him. "Thank you very much," she said with simplicity. "I am very sorry this has happened. You will try and forget it, won't you?"

He was on his feet also. He held her hand in a grasp that was almost pathetic. "No, I shan't forget, Jeannette," he said. "You are the only woman I have ever loved except my mother."

She suppressed a quick twinge of humour. Would he ever realize that his mother was his greatest handicap, she wondered?

"When you have come to love—someone else," she said. "I shall be the first to wish you joy."

He shook his head, but made no contradiction in words, turning, in obedience to her unspoken wish, to leave the recess in which they had been sitting.

Audrey Wilmot with her partner Major Sterne had just come out of the ball-room, and both looked questioningly at the girl in bridal white and the man beside her. There was no mistaking the expression the latter wore in spite of the smile he conjured up to cover it. Audrey looked away again.

"Shall we go up to the corridor?" she said.

Major Sterne's lean face had a sympathetic look. "The poor chap has just been turned down," he murmured to Audrey as they ascended the stairs.

"But what could he have expected?" said Audrey. "I always knew Jeannette would never marry him."

"Who will she marry?" said Major Sterne.

Audrey laughed a trifle nervously. "Probably the very last person one would expect. Either Lord Conister or Buck Wetherby."

Major Sterne whistled. "Is Lord Conister in the field?"

"Of course he is! Didn't you know?" Audrey spoke with a hint of triumph.

"No. I hadn't seen that. That settles it of course." Major Sterne spoke with a certain melancholy that was tinged with resignation. "No one else could stand a chance against him."

Audrey heaved a little sigh. "I shouldn't wonder if they're engaged already," she said. "I'm sorriest of all for Buck if they are. He has been so faithful."

"I think he's rather an ass myself," said Major Sterne.

Jeannette's face expressed the same opinion in the hall below at the moment, as on turning towards the ball-room she came upon him standing like a sentinel in her path. He stood aside for her immediately, but the fact of his presence was an added irritation. She turned from him with a haughty gesture.

"Will you get me an iced drink?" she said to her cavalier. "I am going to the ball-room to have a word with the musicians after this dance."

He departed at once to fulfil her behest, and she divined that he was glad to be gone. She was herself relieved for the brief respite. The strain of the past few minutes had been considerable, and she realized that she was not in the mood for anything further. She would have given much to have postponed the ordeal of supper, but that, of course, was inevitable. Almost for the first time in her life she admitted to herself that she was tired.

But to remain in Buck's proximity was not to be thought of for a moment. The bare sight of him was intolerable. She moved away, keeping her back to him, hoping that he would be gone before the music stopped.

He did not go. She was sure of that without looking, and she walked slowly on up the hall, growing more irritated with every step. She had nearly reached the far end and was reluctantly on the verge of turning when the old butler, Burgess, came to her from the direction of the front-door with an air of importance.

"Excuse me, miss! There are two gentlemen just called to see the master," he said. "Should I show them in?"

She turned in surprise. "Gentlemen, Burgess! Who are they? Guests?"

"Not exactly guests, I think, miss," said Burgess. "They've come on business. So they say."

"Business!" Jeannette echoed him again in growing mystification. "What business? Oh," as a sudden thought struck her, "perhaps they are Press-men. Do you think they are?"

Old Burgess shook his head. "I shouldn't like to say, miss. They aren't exactly smart to look at. But they say they must see the master on a matter of importance."

Jeannette laughed a little albeit with her slight frown of annoyance. "They would say that! Well, I don't think they can see him, Burgess. Perhaps I had better speak to them. Where are they?"

"I left them in the vestibule, miss," said Burgess. "Shall I come along with you in case they should be difficult to get rid of?"

"Oh no!" said Jeannette. "I think I can manage them."

She moved away with that regal look of hers that Skittles had been heard irreverently to remark added

inches to her stature, throwing over her shoulder, "Stay within call—in case I need you, Burgess!"

The advent of these strangers was after all not so surprising since all Bentbridge was agog with her birthday celebrations. They might even be London men, she reflected, and wondered where she could most satisfactorily pose for her portrait. It had appeared in a dozen society papers already, but they would be sure to want another of her taken on her birthday night.

She reached the vestibule, and drew back the heavy curtains that screened it from the rest of the hall. Two men were waiting there. She took them in at a glance, and an odd little misgiving went through her. Were they Press-men? Their clothes seemed to justify the assumption, but their general air served to contradict it. They had a waiting, almost a furtive look, and they did not greet her as though she represented the end of their quest.

The taller of the two, a man with a grizzled moustache and vaguely military bearing, addressed her as she paused in doubt.

"I must apologize for seeming to intrude upon you, madam," he said, "but it is with Mr. Wyngold that our business lies."

"So I have been told," said Jeannette. "I doubt very much if my father can see you. Perhaps you can give me a message for him."

She spoke with a hint of arrogance, for their presence at that moment seemed to her to border on presumption and their air of mystery made her uneasy, she couldn't have said wherefore.

The two men consulted one another with a swift glance, and the second of them made reply.

"I am afraid that is impossible," he said, but he spoke with deference. "Our business is of a strictly personal

nature which can only be transacted with Mr. Wyngold himself. I am sorry, madam, but I fear there is no alternative."

There was obvious purpose in his tone notwithstanding his courtesy. He gave her the feeling of being some small, unimportant obstacle to be brushed from his path. She stiffened instinctively.

"I think you will have to state your business to me first," she said. "I am in my father's confidence in most matters, and it is my business to prevent his being disturbed without good reason."

Again she was aware of a glance that passed between the strangers though even her quick eyes barely detected it. Then the second spoke again. He was of very ordinary appearance, but he had a faintly compassionate air which, strangely, disquieted her more than anything else.

"Madam," he said, "you are making a mistake. We have a right to see your father, though I should be more than sorry to be compelled to insist upon it. I must ask you to take my word for that, and to conduct us to his presence without further delay."

His words carried weight. It came upon Jeannette suddenly, whence she knew not, that this man had authority, though of what description she was utterly at a loss to conjecture. But she realized the futility of withstanding him further, and with grave dignity she abandoned the attempt.

"You may follow me if you wish," she said. "But please understand that I cannot admit you to my father's room without his consent!"

She turned with the words, leaving them to follow without any pretence at ceremony and went, slim and majestic, through the hall and down the passage that led to her father's room.

The dance-music pursued her with mocking gaiety as she went, and many voices seemed to be laughing together. She remembered it all later with a piercing vividness. But at the moment she scarcely noticed. Even the memory of Buck's exasperating behaviour had faded from her mind.

She reached the study-door, paused an instant, then opened it quickly and entered, closing it and holding it so behind her.

"Father," she said, "two men have called to see you. They won't state their business, but they say it is important. I don't think they are Press-men. Will you see them?"

He was sitting by his reading-lamp. He looked up from the paper on his knee, startled. Was he only startled? Somehow he looked scared!

The thought darted through Jeannette like the stab of a rapier. She caught her breath involuntarily.

"What is it, dear?" she said. "Don't you want to see them? They shan't come in if you don't."

He got up with a curious unsteadiness. His eyes had a wide, glassy look wholly unfamiliar to him. "So they have come!" he said. "They have come!"

His look and air frightened her. She still held the door closed. "They need not come in if you don't wish it," she said. "I'll keep them out; shall I? Shall I, Father?"

She spoke insistently, for he did not seem to hear. He had opened a small drawer in his writing-table and seemed to be feeling for something within, but feeling stealthily, —as if he did not wish her to see.

The atmosphere of secrecy became suddenly intolerable to Jeannette. She made a movement to advance, but in a moment her father spoke, checking her.

"No, no, Jeannette! Stay by the door! Keep those

men out! Keep them out, I say! Make any excuse you like! But keep them out—just for a few seconds! Say I am not well! Say anything! Only keep them out! I will let you know—when I am ready."

The jerky, agitated sentences seemed to go through her. What was this? What was this? But there was no mistaking their urgency. She heard in them a cry to which her whole heart responded. In a moment, with lightning promptness she turned. The men were actually upon the threshold. She opened the door and met them face to face.

"Go back, please!" she said briefly and peremptorily. "You can't come in now. My father is engaged. Later, perhaps——"

She broke off, for they did not fall back as she expected. They stood shoulder to shoulder, and the nearer of the two,—the grizzled, martial-looking man,—stretched out a hand above her shoulder to prevent her closing the door.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Jeannette. "Do you dare to force your way in? If so—if so—I can soon summon help."

She stood directly in their way, but the door was pushed from her hold, and swung open behind her, showing the lamp-lit room and the man with his silver hair who stood by the writing-table. The girl's breath came quickly, but she stretched her arms across the threshold from post to post, firmly blocking the path of the intruders.

"You will not enter here—except by force!" she said.

"One second more, Jeannette! Keep them out! I am nearly ready."

She heard her father's voice behind her, strained, entreating, and braced herself anew for his protection.

"Madam," said the martial man, "you are making a mistake. I must explain,——"

He broke off, for suddenly another man came swiftly up behind him. For the first time in her life Jeannette greeted Buck with eagerness.

"Oh, Buck! Take these people away!" she cried to him. "My father——"

His look comprehended her and went beyond. She saw horror dawn in his eyes.

"My God!" he said. "Jeannette! What are you doing?"

And in the same instant from behind her there came an appalling sound, crashing through the distant music as thunder crashing from a sunlit sky. It stunned all her senses, and in a moment she was swept aside. Then she tried to turn, tried to spring back into the room, conscious that the two strangers had rushed forward and were between her father and herself, conscious of a dreadful, huddled heap upon the floor, conscious of a horrible, choking smell of gunpowder. But she failed to fulfil the impulse that urged her, for someone held her back. Someone gripped her fast, smothering her face against his coat, and above her head she heard Buck's voice, low and desperate. "Don't look, Jeannette! For God's sake —don't look!"

Then she knew what had happened as certainly as though her eyes had actually beheld it. And she clung to Buck—she clung to Buck—shaking and impotent and utterly unnerved.

"Is he dead?" she said. "Is he dead?"

And when Buck answered, "Yes," the last of her strength went from her.

She knew that he had told her the truth because he was incapable of lying, and like a black, engulfing sea the horror overwhelmed her.

"Oh, take me away!" she moaned. "Take me out of this!"

His arms encompassed her, lifted her. She shut her eyes instinctively, that they might not look upon that which her brain envisaged with such cruel clearness. And so he bore her from the place of death.

# PART II

## CHAPTER I

### THE TRUTH

"Let me come!" said Lady Varleigh.

She swept Buck aside with masterly self assertion. Of what use was a man in such a crisis? She bent over Jeannette, sunk in a deep chair in the curtained recess of the hall whither he had borne her, and rubbed her ice-cold hands.

"It's all right, darling. I'm here," she said.

Great shudders were shaking Jeannette. She looked up at Lady Varleigh and her lips formed words, but though her throat worked spasmodically no sound would come.

"Bring brandy!" said Lady Varleigh.

She bent lower over the girl and gathered her close into her stout warm arms, as though she would shield her against all the world. Jeannette hid her face, trembling, against the motherly bosom that had never sheltered a child of its own.

"You will be better soon, darling," murmured the tender voice above her. Then commandingly, on a note that was almost harsh: "Is that you, Philip? Don't come here! Keep everyone away—except Buck! I have sent him for some brandy."

There followed a vague confusion of voices in the distance, and at length, after repeated effort, Jeannette managed to speak.

"Why doesn't he come?" she said.

"Who, darling? Buck? He will be here in a moment," said Lady Varleigh, soothingly.

"No—no!" said Jeannette, almost with petulance. "I meant Hugh."

The awful chill inertia was passing. She sat up, slowly freeing herself.

"I will find him for you if you like, darling," said Lady Varleigh.

"No," Jeannette said again. "No!" She got up, steadying herself by the staunch shoulder. "I think I must go and see—and see——"

Words failed her, and again a dreadful shudder caught her. She tottered a little, but recovered herself valiantly.

"Don't—leave me!" she managed to articulate.

"Nothing would induce me!" said Lady Varleigh. "But there is nothing that you can do, my dearest,—nothing whatever."

"Oh, I know that," said Jeannette. "I know that he is dead. Buck told me. But—those men—I ought to see them again. Something is being kept back—something he knew, and I—and I—have got to know."

"Oh, God help you, my precious darling!" said Lady Varleigh.

"You know then!" Jeannette's eyes, keen still despite the shadow of a great horror that they harboured, came to her with unerring directness. "You know! Won't you tell me? Or must I ask Buck? I know he will."

"My love, I will tell you everything—all I know," declared Lady Varleigh, struggling with her distress. "I knew there was something wrong when I came. There were rumours about. Sir Philip had heard. It was the

bank. Someone had said it was not solvent. And now we know the worst. The doors closed this afternoon. And they—those men—came down to-night with a warrant."

"A warrant!" said Jeannette.

"To arrest your father," said Lady Varleigh.

The girl's white face contracted. "But why arrest him—even if the bank had failed? That—that isn't a criminal offence—surely!"

Lady Varleigh shook her head. "My dear, don't ask me! Please don't ask me!" She broke off with a choking sound, and blew her nose vigorously. "I'm not good at legal matters, darling," she said apologetically.

"I will ask Buck," said Jeannette, with calmness.

She turned with the words, aware of his entrance. He came straight to her, and she saw the relief in his face at sight of her. He was carrying a glass which he held to her, but she put it aside.

"No, I don't want it, thank you. I am quite well. Buck, I want to ask you a question. Will you answer it?"

"Certainly," he said.

She looked him straight in the face. "Why—why did these men come here to-night to arrest my father?"

He looked straight back at her and answered without hesitation. "For fraud," he said.

She made a slight movement as if to evade a blow, and then again commanded herself and stood very still. "What do you mean by fraud?" she said.

"The misappropriation of money," said Buck.

Her eyes twitched suddenly and painfully as though they flinched from a blinding light.

"Do you mean—theft?" she asked, her voice very low.

"Yes," said Buck.

"And he—and he—" she spoke laboriously as one de-

termined to be understood and to understand at all costs —"he killed himself to—to—escape the consequences?"

"Yes," said Buck again.

He had stood up very straight during the inquisition, and neither by voice nor look did he express any sympathy.

"Thank you," said Jeannette. She turned to Lady Varleigh, her death-white face quite calm. "It is so much better to know the truth," she said.

"My poor child!" said Lady Varleigh.

"Is there—anything else I ought to know?" Jeannette asked, looking back at Buck. "Anything else I ought to do?"

He shook his head. "Do you want to send for anyone?" he said.

"I don't think so. We have no near relations—none that count." She paused to fight back another chill shudder. "I think everybody ought to be told to go," she said.

"I will tell them," said Buck. He turned to depart. "There is no one you want to see?"

She made a quick gesture, waving him away. "No one—no one!" she said. "I couldn't—see anyone—yet."

"You shan't, darling!" said Lady Varleigh.

But even she was not proof against the next comer—little Valerie West—who broke through the doughty Sir Philip's guard outside the sheltering curtain and ran in, scared and panting, in wild distress.

"Oh, Jeannette!" she said. "Oh, Jeannette!" and threw herself at the statuesque figure in a torrent of tears.

Jeannette's arms went around her, but her face remained like a marble mask as she said, "Don't cry, child! It does no good. We have got to be strong."

"Oh, Jeannette!" the girl gasped. "I—saw him! I was up in the corridor when I heard the shot. And I ran down and saw him—saw him—before they covered his

face. They put me out—and locked the door. But oh, Jeannette! Jeannette!"

"I am so sorry," said Jeannette.

She turned, still supporting the little trembling creature and took up the wine-glass that Buck had brought for her.

"Drink a little of this!" she said. "It will help you."

Valerie obeyed her, scarcely knowing what she did. She drank, her teeth chattering audibly against the glass, and ran wildly on. It seemed there was no stopping her.

"I've never seen anyone dead before, Jeannette. Is it always as terrible as that? I only saw one side of his face at first, and he seemed to be smiling; and then I saw the other—and oh, Jeannette, there was nothing there—only blood—only——"

"Valerie!" said Lady Varleigh.

Her voice broke through the hysterical utterances with an arresting emphasis that seemed to split them into mere inarticulate sound. Valerie sank sobbing against Jeannette.

The elder girl's arm was still about her, but her face had the strained look of one who gazes upon some dread vision. There was tension in every line of her.

She spoke over Valerie's head to Lady Varleigh. "You needn't stop her. I know—I know! Nothing can make any difference now. It doesn't matter what his poor body looks like. It isn't him any longer. He has gone on. And—whatever he has done—" her voice suddenly thrilled though her eyes remained fixed and her face unaltered—"I shall love him just the same—as long as I live."

"Oh, my poor darling! My poor darling!" said Lady Varleigh, and turned away to hide her tears.

"If he only—hadn't—suffered so!" said Jeannette. A dreadful quiver passed over her features with the words,

but she controlled them instantly. She looked at Valerie. "You must go home, dear. Get Skittles to take you! Go home to your mother! She will be able to help you."

"I don't want to leave you!" sobbed Valerie.

"Yes, but you must," said Jeannette gently. "It isn't good for you to stay here. You have had a bad shock, and it is better that you should go. There! I will come upstairs with you if you like. We can't any of us hide behind this curtain any longer. Dear Lady Varleigh," she turned with absolute composure to her friend, "will you find out for me what is being done and come and tell me? I shall be in my room."

"I will do anything, my love," said Lady Varleigh, choking back her emotion.

"You are very good," said Jeannette, and with her arm round Valerie, supporting her, she turned to go.

They passed out through the heavy curtains into an atmosphere that seemed weighted with tragedy. Sir Philip was there, and a few men were waiting about to take their womenfolk home. They all drew back at sight of Jeannette, silently making way for her. But she paused and addressed Sir Philip.

"Do you mind finding Skittles and asking him to go home with Valerie? She came alone, but—she is upset and mustn't go back by herself."

"Of course, of course!" said Sir Philip. "Leave it to me!"

Jeannette gave him a faint smile of thanks, and passed on with her deathly face and utter composure, drawing Valerie with her.

They went up the stairs together, and here Skittles himself met them, hurrying down. He stopped short, flattening himself against the wall without words.

Jeannette spoke to him, just as she had spoken to Sir Philip, her voice clear and wholly emotionless. "I want

you, please, to wait for Valerie and take her home. She had had a very severe shock and must not be left alone. Will you find Colonel West's car and go with her?"

"Of course I will!" said Skittles.

"Oh, thank you!" whispered Valerie.

"Take care of her!" said Jeannette, and again she smiled faintly, impersonally, and passed on.

At the head of the stairs another man stood waiting, grave, self-contained, almost grim in his aloofness.

He bent towards Jeannette and spoke under his breath. "I have been wondering if you would like me to go with the rest."

She met his look, her brows slightly raised. "Please!" she said.

Just the one word spoken with a regal simplicity. He made a small gesture as of protest.

"You are sure? I will stay if you wish."

"Quite sure," said Jeannette.

She turned along the corridor with Valerie. He stretched a detaining hand. His eyes held deep compassion.

"When may I see you again?" he said.

"To-morrow," said Jeannette. And then she added with grave courtesy, "Good night, Lord Conister!"

He bowed without speaking, as he might have bowed to Royalty, and she passed upon her way.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LOST KINGDOM

Lady Varleigh remained at Starfields that night; for, as she had said, nothing would have induced her to leave Jeannette. But so far as the girl herself was concerned there was very little that her love could find to accomplish in the way of help or consolation, for Jeannette remained perfectly calm and fully capable of acting for herself. The house would be emptied of all guests on the following morning, and all who could had left immediately. At the urgent entreaty of Lady Varleigh and her maid Jeannette went to bed, but she was firm in her refusal to allow either of them to stay with her.

"There is no need. Really there is no need," she said. "I would rather be alone. I am more likely to rest. Please go to bed yourselves!"

So Lady Varleigh had to be content to lie down in an adjoining room where she listened all night long for sounds of distress which never reached her.

In the early morning she peeped in to find Jeannette dressed and sitting by her open window. The room was full of autumn freshness, and she guessed that she had been so seated for a long time. But her face, as she turned it, though still pale, showed no sign of any emotion. She smiled at Lady Varleigh.

"I had to get up because I wasn't sleeping. I am afraid you haven't slept either."

"My dear, don't you think about me!" said Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette got up. "I am going out," she said. "No, please don't you come! It would be very bad for you, and I wouldn't have you for the world. When I come back, I shall be ready for—anything."

She had her way, for there was about her a quiet determination that could not be gainsaid. Lady Varleigh watched her put on a coat without protest.

"Won't you tell me where you are going, dear?" she said at the last moment.

"Only to the top of the hill where the arbour is," said Jeannette. "There is a spot there where I hope they will let him lie—because he loved it."

There was no quiver in the words, only the slight pause and an almost inperceptible lowering of the voice after it. Then at the door she suddenly turned back, and kissed Lady Varleigh. "You are good to me," she said, and quickly released herself again and passed out.

The sun was still not very high in the sky as she mounted the path under the pine-trees. The shadows lay long before her, and the air was yet chill with a hint of mist. She was panting before she reached the arbour, but she did not slacken her pace. Entering, she dropped down upon the bench as one who had reached her journey's end, and sat there motionless with clasped hands.

A great silence lay everywhere as though the atmosphere of tragedy had spread even to this place. There were no gay voices now rising from the direction of the lake, no sound of music, no low tones of a lover waiting to clasp her for the first time. Only this deathly quietness that hung like a pall!

For long minutes the girl sat there without movement of any sort save for her short, hard breathing, and her grey eyes looked out between their strange shadowing lashes like the eyes of a snared bird seeking escape. At length she parted her hands abruptly,—it was almost as if she wrung them—and rose.

She went to the entrance of the arbour and leaned against it. "The kingdom has departed from me," she said.

Almost in the same instant a sudden sound broke out close to her—a sound so clear, so joyous, so piercingly sweet, that she started and looked round. Then she smiled—a piteous, trembling smile. It was the voice of a robin who balanced on a twig close to her and sang.

With the song the spell was lifted. The surrounding silence was no longer oppressive. It was as if something terrible had passed from the atmosphere.

Jeannette spoke, her eyes still upon the bird. "Did God send you to tell me that?" she said.

The robin flitted to another twig, still singing his song of eternal hope, and the girl went out on the dewy grass and turned her face to the new-risen sun.

Half-an-hour later she went down the hill again and re-entered the house. The awful stillness met her on the threshold, but she passed in unflinchingly.

Lady Varleigh was lying in wait for her. "There is some breakfast for you upstairs, darling," she said.

"Thank you," said Jeannette.

She went up to her own sittingroom with her friend and ate and drank a little in musing silence.

Lady Varleigh tenderly broke in upon her when she saw that she could take no more.

"My darling, I want you to have your things packed and to come to us. They say it would be best. And I promise that no one shall disturb you there."

"I would rather stay here," said Jeannette.

Lady Varleigh bent forward and held her hand. "I know you would, darling. But will you take an old friend's advice—and please that old friend very, very much in doing so?"

Jeannette looked at her. "Yes," she said, after a moment. "I will come if you think it best. But there is one thing I want done. I think Buck would see to it. Will you arrange for me to see him to-day?"

"I will, darling," said Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette's acceptance of her suggestion caused her some surprise and infinite relief. She had expected opposition, but it was evident that Jeannette had very little personal feeling in the matter at all. It added somewhat to her anxiety that this should be so, but it made her task the easier.

"You will bring everything you value most, darling," she said. "Your birthday gifts—everything."

Jeannette shook her head slightly. "I don't think there is anything I care about very specially," she said.

"Ah well!" said Lady Varleigh.

That again made things easier though her heart bled afresh at the girl's indifference. Had she failed to realize the full extent of the catastrophe, she wondered? Or was she too stunned to feel?

Another matter also was pressing very heavily upon her mind. She had not seen Lord Conister after the tragedy, and she believed that he had left the house without seeking Jeannette. What did that mean? Was he going to forsake her in her trouble?

Her heart swelled at the thought. "I'll go myself and tell him exactly what I think of him if he does!" she told herself with determination.

But the next moment, as though she had read her thought, Jeannette enlightened her on the point. "I saw

Lord Conister before he left last night," she said. "He will come and see me this morning. You will arrange for us to be alone, won't you?"

"Of course, dear," said Lady Varleigh.

"Thank you," said Jeannette again.

Her manner did not serve greatly to reassure Lady Varleigh, but it was evident that she had no intention of discussing the subject, and, despite her misgivings, Lady Varleigh was glad that this was so.

"I will get hold of him first," was her mental resolve.

But in this her intention was frustrated, for Lord Conister arrived unexpectedly before she had time to lay her plans. And with him entered Burgess the butler in a state of considerable agitation to announce the presence of newspaper reporters below who refused to be dismissed without authority.

"Oh, drat the creatures!" said Lady Varleigh, with considerable asperity. "I'd better come and settle them."

She went straightway, and Jeannette and her accepted lover were left alone.

He came straight to her where she sat with folded hands, looking at him.

"My poor child!" he said.

She shivered a little as if a sudden draught had caught her, then quietly she rose and faced him.

"It was kind of you to come early," she said. "Has everyone gone?"

He looked upon her face with its white composure and the eyes that had not closed for so many hours.

"Jeannette!" he said.

She smiled at him faintly, but there was restraint in her smile. "Yes, but we are going to look at this from the sensible point of view," she said. "You realize—of course—that there can be no further talk of marriage between us, don't you?"

He looked surprised. Plainly he had not expected that from her. He replied with dignity. "My word is my bond, Jeannette. I have not come here to-day to ask you to release me."

"I know that," said Jeannette.

He went on with grave kindness. "Far from it, my dear. I have come to offer you my help—and the shelter of my name as soon as you like to avail yourself of it."

"Good gracious!" said Jeannette, and turned sharply from him.

She went to the window and stood there with her back to him. He watched her uneasily. Was she going to break down?

After a moment he continued. "I am not acting upon impulse. I have given the matter my most careful consideration, and I have come to the conclusion that immediate action would be best for us both. We will then go away at once. I will take you round the world. And by the time we return—say, in a year from now—you will have an established position as my wife and very few will take the trouble to remember who you were previous to your marriage. That Jeannette, to my way of thinking, is the only possible means of meeting this *impasse.*"

He spoke with growing insistence, for he was aware of tension in her attitude and he desired before all things to avert a scene. Things were bad enough without that. He earnestly hoped that she would appreciate the effort he was making for her sake, and meet it with compliance. Surely she must see that she had no choice!

She turned from the window as suddenly as she had gone to it, and stood still, her back to the light, her face in shadow. Her hands were at her sides, and he saw that they were clinched.

"You are making that suggestion of a hurried marriage

in order that I may lose my identity as soon as possible!" she said.

He answered her gently, but quite definitely. "My dear, I think it is essential—for your sake as well as mine—that you should do so."

"Yes, I see, I see," said Jeannette. She spoke jerkily, almost disjointedly. "It is certainly very magnanimous of you. Are you sure—you would never regret it?"

"You must never allow me to do so," he said.

She drew a hard breath. "I certainly won't," she said. "Hugh, I can't marry you. I think it was—magnificent of you to stoop so low. But—well, it can't be done."

He looked at her in astonishment. "Are you in earnest?" he said.

She nodded most emphatically. "Very much so."

"But you have taken no time to think it over," he said. "You can't realize! This shock has upset your balance."

She came slowly to him, and he saw that she was very strangely smiling. "I do realize," she said.

He stood motionless, nonplussed. "I don't understand you," he said.

She halted in front of him, upright and slender, very sure of herself. "I will explain," she said. "You asked me to marry you two nights ago. You didn't know then what was going to happen. If you had known, would you have asked me?"

"Jeannette!" he said. "That is not a fair question!"

"I will ask you another," said Jeannette. "If you had not asked me to marry you that night, would you have come to me to-day to offer me—the shelter of your name?"

"Jeannette!" he said again.

There fell a tense silence between them.

Then, with another hard breath, Jeannette spoke. "That is why I can't marry you."

"You think I don't love you," he said. "But you are wrong."

Her strange smile had passed, and her face wore a mystic, solemn look as she replied.

"I think we were both on the edge—on the outer edge—of falling in love. But it hadn't gone very deep with either of us. It won't be difficult to draw back."

"But—child," he said, and he spoke with more feeling than he had yet shown, "what will you do?"

"I don't know," said Jeannette.

He put out a hand half diffidently and touched her arm. "Think again before sending me away!" he said. "Don't decide now! Why should you?"

"But I have," said Jeannette. Her grey eyes flashed up to his. "Oh, can't you see how impossible it is? You with your great name and family honour to marry the daughter of—" She stopped herself. "Can't you see?" she said again.

"I think you are making a mistake," he said.

"Oh no!" she said. "No! The mistake is on your side. You will be thankful—oh, how thankful you will be by-and-bye!—that I haven't taken you at your word. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't possibly do it. So please understand that, and don't ask me again!"

She also spoke with a greater earnestness than she had hitherto permitted herself, and the man, looking into her upturned face with its lines of tragedy, was deeply touched.

"I will only ask you one thing," he said, "and, please, dear, think before you answer, because a good deal depends on it. Are you sure—quite sure—you don't love me a little more than you think?"

Her eyes widened. For a moment they had almost a scared look but it vanished immediately. She smiled at him with lips not wholly steady.

"I am quite sure," she said, and she spoke without a falter, "that I don't love you enough to marry you like that."

"Ah!" he said. "But that is avoiding the issue. Be honest with me, Jeannette! You owe me that."

"I am honest," said Jeannette. "I have told you the truth. I know—quite well—that there is a love which nothing on earth can affect. But—but—" her eyes met his with absolute directness—"neither you nor I have come within measurable distance of that. You are generous enough to offer me a sacrifice; but it is a sacrifice, and I can't take it—just because I realize that. If we loved each other enough, it couldn't count either way. We should belong to each other as a matter of course. But our love isn't like that, and so it's no use going on. It's no one's fault. It simply isn't worth while, that's all."

She ceased to speak, and in the silence that followed something happened. It was as if in some inexplicable fashion they receded from each other, though neither moved. It meant—it came to Jeannette afterwards—that they had been nearer to a complete understanding than she had imagined possible, or than they ever could be again.

The man spoke at length with a deep sigh. "Well, Jeannette, it may be so. I am bound in any case to submit to your ruling. Your decision is really final? You refuse to reconsider it?"

"Oh, what is the good of going on?" said Jeannette.

He made a gesture as of one surrendering to the inevitable, and turning walked to the end of the room.

She watched him with set lips as he slowly returned, and an odd little glimmer of pity sprang up in her eyes as he came again to her.

"It is to be good-bye then, is it?" he said.

"Yes," said Jeannette, brief and uncompromising.

He held out his hand to her. "Jeannette, do you think me very despicable?"

The humility of the words surprised her. She had always regarded the slight haughtiness of his demeanour as one of his main characteristics. She gave him her hand immediately.

"No. I think you are—very wise," she said.

His fingers closed and held. He bent to her and she saw that he was strongly moved. "May I kiss you—just this once, Jeannette," he said—"before I go?"

That moved her also. She suddenly felt her self-control totter. For a moment—just for a moment—she was powerless. Then at his closer touch, desperately she grabbed her failing resolution.

She drew quickly back. "Please don't!" she said. "Oh, please don't!"

"You deny me—even that?" he said.

"Yes, yes! I do. I must." She averted her eyes from his look of reproach. "Oh, please understand," she almost wailed, "and go away! Go away! I can't bear—any more."

He released her instantly, and she escaped from him, her hands over her face. She was shaking from head to foot.

"You mean that?" he said. "I am to go?"

"Yes, please go—please go!" she repeated almost incoherently. "I want to be alone. I must be alone. What are you waiting for? Can't you see I want you to go?"

He took her at her word. There was no alternative. At the door he looked back—a long look of deep regret.

"Good-bye!" he said.

"Oh, good-bye!" said Jeannette.

She uncovered her face then to smile at him, but though she had regained her self-control in a marvellous fashion there was that in her smile which shocked him inexpressi-

bly. It drove him finally from her presence, very effectually depriving him of all further desire to linger. As she had said, what should he wait for since she wished him gone?

But the regret went with him and rode him hard, though he recognized the wisdom of her decision. If she had yielded, all other considerations would have gone to the winds, and his marriage would have been a blot on his escutcheon for all time. The family honour had had a narrow escape, but it had escaped, and he knew that in time he would be thankful that this was the case. She had said that the matter had not gone very deep with either of them, and he was ready to believe it. Only very deep down in his secret heart was the knowledge, never to be admitted even to himself, that he had been very near —disastrously near—to loving her too much to let her go.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LAST VASSAL

She was alone.

A long, quivering breath broke from Jeannette. She went back to the window and opened it wide to the wet west wind, as if she were suffocating. She leaned her head against the woodwork and closed her eyes. During the few moments that followed, it was as if life itself had stopped.

Then there came the opening of the door behind her and she summoned her strength.

"He has gone," she said. "I have sent him away."

She spoke dully, without emotion of any sort, simply stating the fact for Lady Varleigh's information.

But it was not Lady Varleigh who answered her, and she turned swiftly, as if on springs, all her lethargy gone.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," said Buck. "Burgess said he had been told you wished to see me. I knocked, but I don't think you heard."

He stood in the middle of the room, ordinary, even commonplace to the eye of the fastidious, but wholesomely free from all subterfuge. His grey eyes met hers with business-like directness. Clearly he had not come to offer condolences.

"I called just to ask if I could help in any way," he said.

"Thank you," said Jeannette. "There are—one or two things that I thought I might consult you about—if you don't mind."

"I will gladly do anything in my power," said Buck.

She indicated a chair. "Sit down! And first, I should like to thank you for what you did for me last night."

"Please don't!" said Buck.

He stood by the chair until she seated herself near, then sat gravely down, facing her.

She went on, with growing effort. "You realize—of course you realize—that when I was keeping those men out, I had no idea of—of——"

"Of course I realize," said Buck.

She clasped her hands very tightly on her knee. "I have not been told anything—naturally. I look to you for the truth. Will you tell me all you know?"

"Certainly I will," said Buck. "There is no sense in keeping anything from you; but you already know the main points. The bank has failed."

"Hopelessly?" said Jeannette.

"Irrevocably," said Buck. "It has been run on fraudulent lines for a considerable time. Trust money has been appropriated. Accounts have been falsified. Stupendous efforts by means of wild speculations have been made to regain lost ground, but they have only resulted in more and more heavy liabilities. It is early days yet, but I am told it is doubtful if any of the customers receive a penny of their money back."

"Were you a customer?" suddenly asked Jeannette.

"I think that is rather beside the point," said Buck.

"You have promised to tell me everything," she reminded him.

He conceded the matter without protest. "I placed

some money on deposit as a temporary measure at four per cent interest a short time ago. It was not a large sum—nothing to worry about."

"Was it at my father's suggestion?" she said.

"Yes. I imagine," Buck spoke judicially, wholly impersonally, "that he did not realize how near the whole thing was to crashing. It was bound to come sooner or later, but he did not think it would come so soon."

"What is the good of saying that?" said Jeannette, with an odd touch of impatience in the midst of her despair.

"Because I believe it," said Buck. "I believe that he hoped, almost to the very last, to tide things over until ——"

"Until when?" questioned Jeannette, as he paused unexpectedly.

"Until after you were married," said Buck.

"Ah!" She unlocked her hands with an almost feverish gesture. "Well, thank God it happened first!"

"Yes," said Buck.

She looked at him keenly, half-suspiciously, but he seemed unaware of her attention, oblivious as ever of everything beyond the immediate and obvious. His obtuseness had always struck a discordant note within her. It did so now, but with less emphasis than usual. It was unquestionably a relief to feel that here was one who did not possess sufficient imagination to be interested in the effect psychologically upon her of the far-spread tragedy of which she was the first victim. He was content to deal with the matter in hand as if she were a mere spectator, and this fact made it inexplicably easier for her. Despise him as she might, yet for this very reason she could bear to speak more freely to him than to anyone else. The simplicity of his outlook secured her confidence if it failed to win her respect.

"Will you go on?" she said, after a moment. "I want to know what arrangements are being made, what is likely to happen."

"Nothing but the inquest has yet been settled," said Buck. "That will take place to-morrow afternoon, but your presence will not be required."

"Ah!" She looked at him with quick gratitude. "Did you arrange that?"

"I raised the question," said Buck. "But there was no need for discussion. They were very considerate."

"Thank you," said Jeannette. She paused for a moment, then continued in a tone which she strove to make as matter-of-fact as his own: "And—the funeral? Can we make arrangements for that?"

"I believe so," said Buck.

She got up. Though free from agitation, she could not calmly sit and discuss this. Buck rose also in his punctilious fashion, but she waved him back to his chair with an imperious gesture.

"Please sit still! I prefer it. I have been thinking, and I know of course that there may be a difficulty raised about the burial taking place in consecrated ground."

"Won't you leave that to me?" said Buck.

"No." She spoke with decision. "I want to say this. I would prefer that there should be no cavilling at all upon the subject. There is a spot in the grounds—that we both loved—" her voice quivered a little unexpectedly; she steadied it on the instant. "I should like him to be buried there, if it can be arranged."

"It shall be arranged," said Buck. "Will you tell me where it is?"

Jeannette leaned her arm upon the mantelpiece, almost unconsciously seeking support for a weakness of which

she was scarcely aware. "You know the arbour above the trees—my arbour?" she said.

"I know," said Buck gravely.

She bent her head slightly. "I have marked a place there. I went there early this morning. I have put stones for the head and feet. It was our favourite place of all. I—don't—think—anyone could grudge him that."

Again her voice was quivering. She uttered a small cough that sounded half-indignant.

"I will see to it," said Buck, in his wooden fashion. "No, I don't think there will be any difficulty. Is there anything else?"

"Wait a minute!" said Jeannette. She turned her back wholly upon him and stood motionless. No, it was not agitation, it was not mental distress of any sort; all that was far, far below the surface and had scarcely begun to trouble her. But she felt sick, most horribly sick; that was all.

She spoke at length with a supreme effort, battling against that awful sensation of nausea. "I haven't asked to see him, but—I should like to do so, if—if—if—" She could not go on. Something seemed to be giving way in her brain. Her physical senses were reeling, and she could not regain control of them.

She hoped Buck might not notice, but as usual he disappointed her. He rose and came to her. He put a practical arm around her.

"I am quite all right," she managed to utter.

"I know," he said.

Yet he held her, and she leaned with closed eyes for a space upon him, hardly realizing what she did.

In the end, her strength returning, she straightened herself, and at once Buck spoke.

"With regard to that last matter, I don't think I should press it if I were you."

"Ah!" she said. "Then what Valerie said was true! She—she saw him—just afterwards."

"That I can't say," said Buck. "But it would serve no good purpose. I hope you won't insist."

"Very well," said Jeannette, and wondered at her own meekness in thus paying homage to his judgment.

"Is that all?" said Buck.

"Not quite all." She turned very quietly and faced him. "There is just this. There will of course have to be a meeting of creditors?"

"No doubt," said Buck gravely. "Probably more than one."

She nodded. "I thought so. And you are one of them. Well, I say this to you now, I shall say it later to Mr. Fothergill and to any whom it may concern. I do not know in the least to what extent I am entitled to the money my father settled upon me yesterday or to any private property he may have left to me. But I shall not touch one penny of it. His debts are now mine, and I shall never look upon anything as my own while they remain unpaid."

"Forgive me!" Buck said. "But I hope you will change your mind as regards that, for it is utterly unnecessary, and I doubt very much if you would be permitted to do it."

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Jeannette. "Of course I shall do it!" She turned from him with impatience.

How did he manage—even in moments such as these—to be so prosaic, so ordinary,—so asinine?

From behind her came his steady, rather monotonous voice. "In any case, there is no need to come to any decision on that head now. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Jeannette, without turning. "I should like to be alone."

She heard him go at once to the door, and then her heart smote her for her ungraciousness. She wheeled swiftly.

"Buck!"

He stopped short. She was aware of an odd gleam that was certainly not a smile on his somewhat stereotyped features, but she remembered it later rather than noticed it at the time.

She came to him with outstretched hand. "Good-bye! And very many thanks!"

It was an echo of the old Jeannette whom the sea of adversity had not yet wholly overwhelmed, slightly arrogant, plainly superior, conscious of conferring a favour.

He bent a little over her hand. "Good-bye! And remember, I am at your service—always!"

As if she could possibly want him—always! So gibed a small, petulant voice in Jeannette's jaded brain. She summoned a purely conventional smile.

"That's very good of you. Good-bye!" she repeated, and removing her hand, turned away again.

She heard the door open and close behind him, and permitted herself a small gesture of exasperation. He was really a good sort through and through, kind-hearted, considerate in every way. But why—oh, why,—was he such a hopeless idiot?

If only it had been Hugh's strong arm that had supported her! How different! O God, how different! She closed her eyes as a quick shiver ran through her. He had gone. She had sent him from her. And he would never, never return. The love that spans all gulfs was not for her, and in that moment she knew that there was nothing else in the world worth having beside it. All she had ever valued, wealth, pleasure, adulation, all had crumbled away. The die was cast, and the kingdom had departed from her. More, the father she adored had

brought this dishonour, and now he too had gone his appointed way and she was alone. Alone—alone—save for one poor fool—the last of her vassals—who still worshipped her in his feeble, inefficient way, just because he had always done so and lacked the initiative to cut himself like the rest and leave her to sink.

She clasped her hands together with an anguished gesture. "O God!" she said. "O God, let me die too!"

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SINKING SHIP

"My dear, I couldn't get back before," said Lady Varleigh. "Those yapping curs—you know what they are. One can't live or die, marry or be divorced, without the interference of the Press these days. It's perfectly damnable. Oh, forgive me, my dear, but I have some reason. And has he gone already? When is he coming again?"

"Do you mean Lord Conister?" said Jeannette, stiff-lipped. "Never!"

"What?" said Lady Varleigh, then at sight of Jeannette's face: "Oh, damn the man! Yes, and I mean it too. He's just like all the rest. There isn't one in a thousand who would save a woman going through hell if he were likely to get singed himself in the process."

"I think you are unjust," Jeannette said.

"Oh, am I?" said Lady Varleigh, and shook her head emphatically. "I've never wronged a man yet, my dear, and I think it's doubtful if I ever shall—or could. He's gone, you say? Then good riddance! I never did like him."

Jeannette uttered a curious jarring laugh. "Yes, he is gone. And now you will never have tea with the King. I am so sorry, dear Lady Varleigh."

"Hush!" said Lady Varleigh, almost as if she had spoken sacrilege. "We won't talk in that strain, my darling. You will win out of all your troubles. That I know,—because you are born to conquer. Has anyone else been to see you?"

"Yes. Buck," said Jeannette.

"Ah!" Lady Varleigh's black eyes gleamed approval. "Excellent young man! But where is he, then? You—surely didn't manage to send him away too?"

"Yes. I told him to go," said Jeannette. "But he will come back again. He always does."

"Bless him!" said Lady Varleigh with fervour. "Well, darling, let us find Marie, and go and pack your things! You know how I have always wanted you."

"Yes, I will come," said Jeannette very wearily.

She yielded herself to all Lady Varleigh's loving arrangements without demur of any sort. It mattered so little to her whether she went or stayed. She did not seem to be acting on her own volition at all just then. Her dismissal of Lord Conister seemed to have used up all her strength, and after all there was nothing else that mattered. Later, she would have to assert herself, but for the present there was nothing to be done save to drift with the tide.

Her thoughts kept going back to her father. Her mind clung to the memory of him. She had a strong feeling that his absence was only temporary, almost an expectancy at any moment of his return. Horror indeed had touched her, but grief as yet scarcely at all. She had not begun to miss him. She did not realize him gone. Though she had actually chosen his final resting-place, she did not feel—and in this reason strongly supported her—that he would ever fill it. They might lay in that chosen place something that once had contained him, but himself—that beloved personality about whom all her

being was so closely entwined—ah, never—never—never!

It was not religion that made her know this. It was no action of faith within her. It was reason and instinct combined, making of Death almost a mockery. He had forced the gates and escaped. That was all she knew. She had not begun to doubt or question. All that would come after, in the long, sleepless nights that lay ahead. But at present her feelings regarding him were almost nil, wrapped in a sort of wonder that was like a dream-haze all about him. She was quite certain that he could not be far away, quite certain that his love still encompassed her, and that that strange thing Death was but a mystic curtain hanging between them.

It was evident that everyone expected her to be upset, prostrated with grief; but save for a numb sense of loss and that fit of nausea in Buck's presence she was not aware of any strain. Her mind had grasped the sordid truth concerning the bank, but it refused to dwell upon it. It did not seem to be the main point at issue. She was being whirled along by a current there was no withstanding, and nothing made any lasting impression upon her. She might be flung against rocks and wounded in a dozen places, but she felt no pain, save for that one bitter pang when her lover had left her and gone his way. That had hurt her cruelly for the moment, but now she was being rushed on again, and there was no time even for suffering. It would all come later. She knew in a vague way that anguish awaited her, but it did not seem to matter. Her paramount thought was for her father just then, and that, whatever came to her, he at least had escaped this awful cataclysm.

So Lady Varleigh had her way unhampered by any protests, and made the best of it. She also sent a note to that effect to Buck Wetherby which reached him just as he was entering his old Hall on his return from Star-

fields. He read the note standing on the steps of his home, his brown face as usual wholly unremarkable for any emotion, in fact almost devoid of any expression whatever. Having read it, he turned and entered the house.

Skittles met him on the threshold, wearing his usual grin yet looking curiously red and embarrassed therewith.

"Hullo!" he said.

"Hullo!" said Buck, and paused to hang up his cap before passing on.

Skittles paused also. "Been to Starfields?"

"Yes," said Buck.

"Anything doing?" questioned Skittles.

"Inquest to-morrow," said Buck.

"What is Jeannette going to do?" said Skittles.

"She is going to Lady Varleigh," said Buck.

Skittles' faced showed relief. "I thought she probably would. Look here, Buck, old sport! I want a word with you."

"It's lunch-time," observed Buck.

"Yes, I know. And then it'll be time for something else, and so on till bed-time. Surely you're not in such an almighty hurry for lunch that you can't spare ten seconds before you begin!"

Skittles' tone was half-bantering, half-persuasive. He put a hand on Buck and turned him towards the library.

Buck went philosophically, possibly realizing that it would be quicker in the end. But directly the door closed upon them it became evident that, notwithstanding his importunity, Skittles was in some difficulty as to the best means of unburdening himself. He kicked the library fire two or three times with energy before he could bring himself to begin.

Buck meanwhile, not to waste time, took up the pipe he proposed to smoke after luncheon and proceeded to

fill it with the serious attention he bestowed upon most things.

"I say!" suddenly announced Skittles. "I just thought I'd tell you that I've come to a decision at last, and—I'm going to exchange into the Indian Army."

Buck barely glanced up from his task. "I thought you would," he remarked.

Skittles laughed with a touch of uneasiness. "Glad to see the back of me, what?"

"Not specially," said Buck. "But I think you'll probably do more good out there than over here, and you're not the sort to get home-sick."

"Oh, I'm not going alone," said Skittles, and laughed again as his brother's eyes came up to him. "You know, old fellow, I've seemed to be rather wasting my time lately. But I had a reason. I've been getting to know my own mind."

"Didn't you know it before?" said Buck.

"No, I didn't. Fact is, I always wanted to go to India, but not to find a wife there. Too much competition, I gather, and not nearly enough prizes to go round. So I made up my mind that if I went, I'd take a wife along with me."

Skittles was recovering his assurance now. He even spoke a trifle bombastically.

"You're going to be married then?" said Buck.

Skittles smiled with charming *sang-froid*. "You've hit it, my dear chap. It's happened rather suddenly in the end. Those things often do. I hope it won't be a great shock to you."

"Who is the lady?" said Buck.

"Can't you guess?" said Skittles.

Buck's brows went up very slightly. "If it is—Miss Wyngold, I think you are taking a good deal for granted," he said.

Skittles stared. "Miss Wyngold! My good man! You don't know what you are talking about. I always admired her of course, but she never took me seriously. I never seriously proposed to her either. It was always more or less of a joke between us. Surely you knew that!"

"You don't feel disposed to offer yourself to her now?" said Buck.

His tone was one of mild curiosity and he returned to the filling of his pipe as though that matter were of infinitely more importance than the one under discussion.

Skittles regarded him with a hint of scorn. Buck's slow methods of reasoning never had commanded much respect from him.

"Well, scarcely," he said. "Circumstances could hardly be described as propitious for that sort of thing at the present moment. Goodness knows how she is situated, poor girl. One might get dragged down oneself trying to help her."

"One might," said Buck.

"Hardly likely of course," said Skittles. "Still, it's a chancy world, and one never knows. Besides, as I say, we never took each other seriously. She'd have turned me down at once if she ever had."

"And so you don't propose to give her the chance now?" said Buck.

"I do not." Skittles began to frown. "You talk as if I were under an obligation to do so. It's all rot. I'm not. Besides, I'm engaged to Valerie now."

"Oh, it's Valerie, is it?" Buck looked up again, surveying his brother with eyes that were gravely contemplative.

Skittles stirred, as if uneasy. "Why shouldn't it be Valerie? She's a dear little girl and very fond of me. Of course there's no money in the West family—any

more than there is in ours—but, as say, I shall go into the Indian Army, and we shall be all right then."

"What made you propose in such a hurry?" asked Buck.

"Oh, that!" Skittles began to laugh again. "Well, that was more her doing than mine, poor little soul. I took her home last night, as you know. She'd had a horrid shock and was all shaken up and hysterical. And I simply had to cuddle and comfort her, and in the end I kissed her. She didn't seem to mind at the time, but this morning, when I just dropped in to enquire, she made such a fuss about it that—well, I found it was simply up to me to propose; which I did,—with the result—" Skittles drew himself up dramatically—"that I am now committed to marry the dearest little girl in the world. And I can't say I'm sorry."

"I'm glad of that," said Buck, in his stiff, uninteresting fashion. "I hope you'll manage to make her happy —and be happy yourself." He held out his hand somewhat perfunctorily. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks!" said Skittles. "You always were a gusher, weren't you? I trust the arrangement meets with your approval?"

"Quite," said Buck. "What do the Wests say?"

"Oh, the old woman fell on my neck of course. I always knew she would. The old man drank two glasses of port to celebrate the occasion, and to ease his gout. They are all going to give him a wide berth now till he's got over it. Oh, and I'm dining there to-night, by the way. We're going to fix things up as quickly as possible. I shall put in for an exchange at once."

"I wish you luck," said Buck, and glanced at the clock. "How about lunch?"

"Exactly," said Skittles. "Just what I was going to suggest myself. But tell me first! How's Jeannette?"

The silence that followed the question was broken by the clatter of fire-irons. Buck was methodically putting the fire together before leaving the room. His task accomplished he stood up.

"I have just come from Starfields," he said. "Miss Wyngold is standing the strain wonderfully. The inquest is to take place to-morrow. I am to give evidence; but she is not required to do so, and she is therefore leaving for Varleigh Park to-day."

"Oh, they've nabbed you for a witness, have they?" said Skittles. "Glad I am out of that anyhow. You actually saw the affair, didn't you?"

"I actually saw it," said Buck.

"Pretty sickening for you!" commented Skittles. "Well, come on, I say! Do let's have some lunch! You're not going to wait for Bandy, what? He's gone for a gallop with Daphne. I heard her offer him a mount yesterday."

"No, I don't think we need wait for him," said Buck.

Skittles' cheery grin returned. "Shouldn't wonder if he gets engaged next. She's a sporting kid, and there's bound to be some money from that old uncle of hers some day. I wouldn't mind going in for her myself if I had the chance."

"I should stick to the present programme if I were you," said Buck.

"Oh, rather! I'm not grumbling. Valerie's a little ripper. I don't want to swop her for anyone. She wants to call me Kit, but I won't let her. Would you? Just imagine! There are limits, and I refuse to start my career in India with such a handicap as that."

"The fewer handicaps the better," said Buck. "Your career comes first."

"You solemn old ass, that was a joke," said Skittles.

Buck looked at him in his direct, unimaginative fashion. "Oh yes, I saw you were being funny," he said. "Strange to say, so was I."

"Afraid I missed the point," said Skittles.

"It doesn't matter," said Buck.

## CHAPTER V

### THE END OF THE QUEUE

It was not till Buck was half-way through dinner that evening, sitting alone in the shadowy, ill-lit diningroom, that Bandy at length put in an appearance. He came in scowling, heavy-footed, and flung himself into a chair with no more than a grunt of greeting. John, the aged butler, waited silently upon him. Buck continued his dinner.

Bandy disposed of his with the rapidity of a surly dog suspicious of an enemy lurking behind him. He made no pretence of enjoyment. Finally, he pushed aside his plate and pulled out some cigarettes.

"Do you mind?" he demanded of Buck.

"Fire away!" said Buck.

He had finished himself by that time, and he brought his pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill it. Bandy got up and began to prowl about the room, while John deftly and noiselessly cleared the table.

Neither brother spoke while the old man remained in the room, but as he softly withdrew and closed the door behind him, Buck spoke to the gloomy figure that paced to and fro in the shadows.

"Been riding to-day?"

"No!" Bandy snapped the word; it sounded like a snarl.

Buck pulled at his pipe for a few seconds, then spoke again. "You've got to clear out to-morrow, haven't you?"

"Yes." Bandy snapped again, but not quite so ferociously as before. He came suddenly forward into the lamplight and stared aggressively at Buck. "I should be clearing out in any case," he said, thrusting out his chin.

Buck looked up at him from the springless depths of the armchair to which he had betaken himself. "I'm sorry you're going, old chap," he said with simplicity.

Bandy's face softened as if some magic wand had touched it. He dropped into a chair close to Buck and gripped him by the knee. "I'm going to tell you something," he growled, "which only one other person in the world will ever know,—that is, if she's white, as I think she is. I went to see Jeannette this afternoon. She was just leaving for Varleigh Park, but I saw her alone for a few minutes. And I asked her to marry me."

Buck's hand came down and very steadily grasped his. He said nothing whatever, and he continued to smoke his pipe.

Bandy went on somewhat jerkily after a moment. "I never of course thought she'd have me, but after this happened—well, somehow I felt I owed it to her to let her know that it didn't matter a damn so far as I was concerned. I made her understand that all right—at least she said she did—but she turned me down all the same. She was very decent about it, but I can't help being a bit cut up. I thought that just possibly I had got the ghost of a chance now."

"Aren't you going to ask her again?" said Buck, after a few moments of silent sympathy.

Bandy shook his head. "No good. Sheer waste of time. She said so. And she knows her own mind if

anyone does. Besides," he spoke with a ghastly effort at cheeriness, "I shall get over it no doubt. I'm not that sort of ass, thank goodness. I never was one to cry for the moon."

"Very wise," said Buck. He took a good pull at his pipe, and they sat in silence for several seconds.

The firelight played upon Buck's face as he lay back in his chair, emphasizing certain lines about the mouth and eyes that gave him a somewhat drawn look. Bandy, presently glancing at him, noticed it.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Matter?" said Buck.

"Yes. You're looking a bit mouldy. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing," said Buck, and as he spoke he smiled, revealing his ordinary, uninteresting self.

Bandy, satisfied, relapsed into gloomy contemplation of the fire. "Wonder what the devil she'll do," he said.

"Impossible to say," said Buck.

"Yes, I know. But what do you think she'll do?" Bandy spoke argumentatively, even combatively. "If she won't marry—and there's nothing to live on——"

"There's Lady Varleigh," said Buck.

"Pooh! She'll never live on her," declared Bandy.

"She won't live on anyone if I know her," said Buck.

"Then she'll have to marry," argued Bandy. "I told her I'd get out of the Army and go and do farming in South Africa if she'd have me. But it was all no go. She simply wouldn't listen. But what on earth will she do? Do you think she'll marry the old Dough-nut?"

"No," said Buck.

"Then what—" Bandy suddenly stopped and stared at him. "Why—why—" he stammered as if stupefied—"you don't mean to say you think she'll marry you!"

"Did I say so?" said Buck.

"No! But you—but you—Oh, I say, I'm sorry. I really forgot about you," said Bandy with some compunction.

"My dear chap, there's nothing to remember," said Buck, and leaning forward knocked out his pipe on the grate with his usual accurate care. "You say you will get over it. So, I presume, will everyone else—in time."

"You won't," said Bandy.

"I don't know that I have anything to get over," said the elder brother thoughtfully. "If I never marry at all, I daresay it won't kill me."

"You'll never marry," said Bandy with confidence. "You're not the sort. As Skittles says, you're too resigned to your fate."

"No doubt Skittles knows," said Buck.

"He's fairly shrewd," admitted Bandy, "though I nearly kicked him for saying it. For you're a better fellow than either of us, and he knows it as well as I do."

"Think so?" said Buck.

"Yes, I do." Bandy spoke with conviction. "And probably Jeannette knows it too. Only you're so old-fashioned and deliberate that she gets out of patience. Why don't you have a shot at her, Buck? She might—goodness knows—she might feel inclined to take you if everything else falls through."

"I wonder," said Buck.

"Well, it's no good wondering. Go in and try!" Bandy forgot his own defeat in the excitement of urging on this other, most unlikely competitor. "By George, it would be a lark if you got her, after all. But you'll have to work like the very dickens. Sitting still won't do it. You've waited at the end of the queue so long that it's no wonder that people are apt to forget you're

there. Do get a move on, man! Have a shot—anyhow! Try a bit of punch!"

His urgency brought a smile to Buck's face—the pleasant, cheery smile that most people knew and liked.

"I'm not so sure that it's a case for punch, old chap," he said. "Still, the chance might come. You wouldn't feel hurt supposing it did—and I took it?"

"Hurt!" Bandy spoke with supreme contempt. "Oh, don't be an ass, Buck! You always are, you know. But I can't help thinking you might get out of it if you tried."

"Thank you for that," said Buck, and the smile was still on his face, making him almost goodlooking in a strictly stereotyped way. "That's jolly decent of you, Bart, and I shan't forget it. I will try and get out of it —if you think it's any use."

"Of course it is," said Bandy with enthusiasm. "Look here! Can't we drink something? I'd like to wish you luck."

"Then you'd better ring and ask John if there's anything to drink," said Buck.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE REFUSAL

On the day of her father's funeral, a bleak wind swept up the valley, and it seemed to Jeannette that the whole world had turned grey. His body was laid to rest privately in the place that she had chosen, and at his own request the elderly rector of Bentbridge read the Burial Service, while Jeannette, old Mr. Fothergill, Sir Philip and Lady Varleigh and Buck stood round. In the background stood a group of servants from the house and grounds awe-struck and staring. But to Jeannette it was as though she were in utter solitude, such was the desolation of her soul.

When it was over, she was the first to turn from that lonely grave and to move away down the hill-path where she had walked not a week ago with Lord Conister on the night that he had told her of his love—on the night that he had held her in his arms and kissed her for the first and last time. And still she was not conscious of any pain, only of a great weariness of soul and body alike that seemed to be numbing all her faculties.

When Buck came up with her and walked beside her, she took no notice. His action caused her no surprise and certainly no gratification. Was he not always there?

When presently she stumbled at a tree-root and his hand grasped her elbow, holding her up, she still gave him no attention. He was there in the natural course of things. She neither wanted him nor desired him gone.

He took her down to the drive where the Varleighs' car waited, and at the last moment he spoke.

"Jeannette, the worst is over. You will never go through this again." She looked at him uncomprehendingly, then, realizing that he had offered her something that was meant for consolation, she bent her head in conventional acknowledgment. It was presumption on his part of course to address her by her Christian name, but it was too unimportant a matter to rouse her indignation. She passed it by.

Then came Lady Varleigh, furtively drying her eyes, tenderly on the watch for any sign of weakness on the part of her darling, and scolding Sir Philip in an audible whisper for offering the rector a lift.

"Now there won't be room for you, Buck. I am so sorry. I wanted you to come back with us."

"That's very kind of you," said Buck. "But I couldn't have come in any case. I have to be getting back."

Lady Varleigh addressed Jeannette. "Buck is going, dear. Won't you say good-bye to him?"

That moved Jeannette a little; she bent forward. "I suppose I shall see you again?" she said, and wondered why she said it.

"To-morrow," said Buck.

She leaned back again. "That will do," she said.

She did not offer her hand, nor did he seem to expect it. He shook hands with Lady Varleigh and took leave of the three men behind her. Then he went away, and the grey world seemed to turn more bleak and grey—though neither his coming nor his going could have made it so.

They returned to Varleigh Park, depositing the kindly clergyman on their way. He tried to murmur a few words of comfort to Jeannette at parting, but when her haunted eyes looked up to his he somehow failed to utter them.

"God comfort you, my child!" was all he found to say.

And Lady Varleigh's sympathetic and tearful sniff was the only audible response that he received.

Jeannette merely bent her head again.

At Varleigh Park they went to the library with the old lawyer who was understood to say that he had a statement to make regarding the will. But he also seemed to find some difficulty in expressing himself, and Lady Varleigh turned almost immediately to Jeannette.

"Don't you stay, darling! I will tell you all about it afterwards."

They were all trying to spare her feelings. It amused her in an odd, impersonal way. No one seemed to realize how little she was capable of feeling.

"I probably know what Mr. Fothergill has to say," she said, smiling faintly. "I suppose what my father left to me was not legally his to leave."

The lawyer bowed profoundly. "I fear that is the exact case," he said. "At the same time, the money settled upon you on the occasion of your coming of age is, I believe, clearly your own, though there may be some question of death duties. That money was kept separate from all the rest, and was in no way connected with—er—recent unfortunate business transactions."

Jeannette was standing by the table, one hand listlessly leaning upon it; but at his words she suddenly straightened herself, as though at the tightening of a spring.

She faced Mr. Fothergill with eyes that burned with

a strange pale fire. "Do you actually think," she said, "that I would touch that money—one penny of it—whatever its source? My father's liabilities are mine. Whatever he did—" she held herself proudly—"I am prepared to answer for to the utmost of my power."

Mr. Fothergill made a deprecatory gesture. "I am sure no one would expect that of you," he said, "or hold you responsible in any way."

"But I am responsible," said Jeannette.

She was breathing quickly. Lady Varleigh came and put an arm around her. "Don't upset yourself, dear," she said tenderly. "There is no need for anything of this sort. We will take things as they come and hope for the best. Now darling, come with me and we will have tea together!"

But Jeannette resisted her. "Forgive me, Lady Varleigh!" she said. "But I can't submit to this. There must be no misunderstanding in this matter. I tell you all—and I mean it—I am prepared to swear it—that I will take nothing either in money or property that may be legally mine. Everything I possess will go towards the payment of my father's liabilities. I will touch none of it."

"But, my dear, my dear!" remonstrated Lady Varleigh. "There are limits to everything. You must think a little of yourself—your future."

Jeannette turned to her. "I am thinking of myself," she said, and her voice trembled slightly for the first time, "and of no one else. Can't you see how tremendously this matters to me? How could I possibly bear to live with this gigantic mill-stone round my neck? Don't you realize that this is my job—the only thing left to me to do? I owe it to myself. It may not mean very much to all those people who have lost their money, but it means everything to me to restore what I can."

Lady Varleigh turned and looked from Sir Philip to Mr. Fothergill and back again, but gathered no inspiration in the process. Sir Philip, however, at her second glance came gallantly into the breach, widening it with every word he spoke.

"My dear Jeannette," he said, "your sentiments do you credit and are very praiseworthy indeed. I shall make it my business to see that they are made public, so that no ill feeling can possibly be harboured against you. In fact, I think the most heartfelt pity is the only sentiment that anybody could feel towards you. Your position is one of—of—of——"

"Of the most poignant tragedy," prompted Mr. Fothergill in a low voice.

"Quite so, quite so!" said Sir Philip, irritably accepting the old lawyer's assistance. "And not one of us could ever regard it in any other light. At the same time,——"

"Philip," said Lady Varleigh, "Jeannette and I are going to have tea upstairs. Come, my darling, you have had enough. Let us go!"

She spoke with urgency, and Jeannette yielded; but as she went, she threw a few words over her shoulder very clearly and decidedly to the two men she was leaving.

"Please remember that my mind is quite made up, and nothing will induce me to change it!"

Then she passed out with Lady Varleigh, leaving a dismayed silence behind her.

"Gad, she means it too!" commented Sir Philip.

"Very regrettable!" said Fothergill.

"She'll change her mind," said Sir Philip.

"I regret to say that I think it extremely improbable," said Mr. Fothergill.

"I don't know what the devil she'll do if she doesn't," said Sir Philip.

"Doubtless time will prove," said Mr. Fothergill.

Whereat Sir Phillip glared as at an opponent who had had the best of an argument and said no more.

Up in her room, Lady Varleigh waited upon Jeannette with great tenderness; but the girl seemed scarcely aware of her ministrations. She sat before the fire wrapped in thought.

"There is a letter for you, darling," said Lady Varleigh presently, and Jeannette roused herself to receive it, though without much interest. She opened it, and sat with it in her hand obviously not reading it, while several quiet minutes passed.

Lady Varleigh leaned towards her at last and patted her arm. "Won't you read it, love, and see what he says?"

Jeannette started a little, and regarded the paper that she held with a faint smile. "It is from Captain Friar," she said.

"Ah!" said Lady Varleigh. "I thought we should hear something of him before we were much older." She got up. "Take your time over it, darling! I have several matters to occupy me."

Jeannette stayed her with a gesture. "You can see what he says if you like. It's only an offer of marriage."

"My dear!" said Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette continued in a dull, uninterested fashion. "It is very kind of him, because I refused him that night of the ball. He asks me to reconsider it, but of course I can't. It really is very good of him considering his mother. I wonder he dare!"

"Darling, I should reconsider it if I were you," said Lady Varleigh.

"Why?" said Jeannette.

"Because, dear, he would make you a very good hus-

band," stoutly replied her friend. "He loves you, and he would do his very utmost to make you happy."

"He wouldn't succeed," said Jeannette. "Nor would he be happy himself."

"You could make him happy, Jeannette," said Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette shook her head. "No. He cares too much." She looked down at the letter in her hand. "He will get over it," she said. "He told me so. But if I married him, he never would. I should spoil his life."

"My dear, why?" said Lady Varleigh.

"Because I don't love him," said Jeannette.

She spoke with quiet finality, and having spoken stooped slowly forward and dropped the letter into the fire.

"He is a good fellow," she said.

"He is, dear, he is!" almost wailed Lady Varleigh. "And there are so few of them left. Do you know who we passed in the car this afternoon? Did you notice?"

"I didn't notice anything," said Jeannette.

"Major Sterne and Audrey Wilmot—by the stile into the church fields. And they looked so intimate,—drat 'em!" said Lady Varleigh on the verge of tears. "Oh, do think twice, darling, before you refuse any more! I know Bandy was out of the question, but Jack Friar is different. He has got a future and a name."

Then it was that Jeannette rose with the dignity of a princess and looked her friend in the eyes.

"Lady Varleigh," she said, "please put all idea of my marrying out of your mind entirely! It is utterly impossible for me to think of it for a single moment, just as impossible as that I should keep anything that I now possess. I am not going to sell myself to any man in return for a living, for that is what it comes to. I don't

love Jack Friar. I don't love Major Sterne; and I hope he and Audrey will marry and be happy together."

Lady Varleigh met the challenge in the grey eyes, and rapidly changed her tactics. "My darling, I am very glad," she said. "Now I shall be able to keep you for myself."

Jeannette's mouth quivered a little. "How dear of you!" she said. "But I can't do that either."

"Stuff and nonsense, sweetheart!" said Lady Varleigh. "You'll have all my property when I die, so you may as well enjoy a little of it before."

Jeannette knelt suddenly down beside her. "Oh, that is so like you!" she said, and real feeling was in her voice at last. "But—darling Lady Varleigh—don't you see I could never do that? And even if you left me all you have, I couldn't keep it. Whatever comes to me will go —where everything else goes—to pay father's debts."

"Ah!" said Lady Varleigh. She held Jeannette closely to her, but her voice was crisp with disapproval. "In that case, my dear, I shall make another will to-morrow, for I do not feel called upon to subscribe to that. I consider that the public will get more than enough of my property in death duties as it is. But that does not prevent you being a daughter to me for the rest of my life. I badly want a daughter, Jeannette. I hope you will."

Jeannette was clinging to her, but there was refusal in the very holding of her arms. "I am going to make my own living," she said, with her head against Lady Varleigh's shoulder.

"Don't be silly, darling!" said Lady Varleigh.

"I'm not! I'm not! Don't you see that there is nothing else to be done? I can't live on charity," said Jeannette.

"My dearest, you would give far more than you would

receive," swiftly replied Lady Varleigh. "It would be infinitely harder for you perhaps, but—think of the joy to me!"

A curious spasm went through Jeannette that was like a sob that never reached her throat. "There are some things I can't do—even for you," she said, "though I love you so."

"Then we won't talk any more about it," said Lady Varleigh. "There is plenty of time in any case. And you are so tired, poor darling. There, you shan't be worried any more. Just let it all go by and rest till you feel better. Whatever happens, God will provide."

"Do you really believe that?" said Jeannette.

"Yes. If we will let Him!" said Lady Varleigh.

## CHAPTER VII

### VALERIE

THE day that followed was a Sunday. Lady Varleigh would fain have kept Jeannette in bed, for the girl's eyes with their persistent wakefulness troubled her not a little; but Jeannette would have none of it.

"I can't go to church," she said. "But you and Sir Philip must, and you are not to think about me even. I shall be perfectly all right. I am going to write to Captain Friar."

"Indeed I shall think about you," said Lady Varleigh, "and probably nothing else. I wouldn't go if it weren't for Philip, but he's such a poor thing and pretends he can't go by himself."

"Of course he can't," said Jeannette. "Besides, why shouldn't you go? There is no reason that I can see."

"It won't do me a bit of good," said Lady Varleigh. "But I shouldn't like the Lord to think I wouldn't take that much trouble for the chance of meeting Him. So if you won't give me a reasonable excuse to stay at home, I'll go."

"That's right," said Jeannette, and was conscious of a faint feeling of relief of which she was ashamed. "I assure you I shall be perfectly all right. And I must get this letter written."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Lady Varleigh. "If only Jack's mother would marry again or die!"

"Don't be absurd!" said Jeannette. "It's nothing whatever to do with Jack's mother."

Lady Varleigh sighed again and departed. She was beginning to realize that Jeannette meant to take her fate into her own hands, and her heart misgave her as to what that fate might be.

Jeannette sat down to her letter. The chill of yesterday was still in the air, but the sun was shining, and she sat by her open window with her blotter on her knees. But though she had meant to make a very brief affair of her epistle to Jack Friar, somehow words—suitable words—eluded her. Not that her resolution so far as he was concerned wavered for an instant; but she could not keep her mind fixed upon him and the matter in hand. Other thoughts would crowd in upon her, blurring her perceptions, making concentration almost impossible.

"So few of them left!" Why did that foolish lament of dear Lady Varleigh's stick in her brain with such persistence? What did it matter how many or how few when she was firmly determined to refuse them all? She had already refused Lord Conister. How long ago it seemed! Bandy too—poor boy, and it hurt him! But what else could she have done? She never had meant to marry Bandy, and he must have known it. Of the rest, Jack Friar had written to place himself at her service in her adversity, because he loved her; but Jack was a man of rank, and out of the question. Major Sterne had turned for consolation whither she believed his heart had preceded him long since, and she was glad of it. She had wanted Audrey Wilmot to be happy, and she was just the sort of girl to enjoy poultry-farming. A faint smile drew her lips. Poor old Dough-nut with his ducks and his hens and his triumphant egg-production! She

liked him sincerely, but she was glad he had not asked her to share in that triumphal program with him. She remembered how once he had greeted her with the words: "Fifty-four to-day!" And she had replied: "I don't believe it, but many happy returns all the same!" And he hadn't even laughed, but had turned away rather hurt. Poor old Dough-nut!

Well he was out of the running now, and she herself was disqualifying Jack Friar. There remained but two, of whom one was Skittles and the other—Buck!

Skittles! She wondered Skittles had not come to her. Somehow she had expected him first—all eagerness and ardour, overriding every objection with impetuous determination. Yes she had expected Skittles, and—she owned it to herself as she sat there musing—she would not have found it easy to have sent him away. For Skittles with his winning personality, his robber-like boldness and his charm, had never been a submissive slave. He had always been on the verge of unruliness, and she had always found it a little difficult to keep him in his place with the rest. That was why she had liked him. His devilry had fascinated her. There had always been a feeling at the back of her consciousness that he could have overwhelmed her, had he chosen, and sometimes it had almost seemed a foregone conclusion that one day he would choose.

But the kingdom had departed from her, and he had not come. She puzzled over it with drawn brows. Surely he would come! His allegiance had been so obvious. He could not mean to withdraw it thus. After all, she was still herself, and—surely it was herself that he wanted! She recalled how they had danced together, how he had held her with his eyes and thrilled her with his touch, telling her by every means, save words, of the passion in his heart.

"I am sure he wanted me," said Jeannette. And yet —and yet—why had he not come?

She leaned her chin upon her hand. Of course he would come! He would probably come to-day. And when he came—when he came—well, equally of course she would have to send him away like the rest. She couldn't possibly marry him now, unless—unless—unless he refused to go. She felt her heart give a sudden throb and knew that the blood mounted in her white face. Yes, he might refuse to go. It would be very like him. What would she do then? An odd feeling of weakness came upon her. She knew in that moment that if Skittles chose, he could batter down her resistance by the sheer, overwhelming force of his passion. All the rest she could send away, but—no, not Skittles.

There came a knock at the door, and a servant appeared with the news that Miss West had called to see her. Might she be allowed to come up?

Jeannette came swiftly out of her musings. She laid pen and blotter aside. Jack would have to keep. "Of course! Please show her up at once!" she said.

There was a brief pause, and then Valerie, slightly hesitating, not very sure of herself, stood at the door. "May I come in?" she said.

"Of course!" Jeannette said again, and held out her hand, which Valerie eagerly sprang to clasp.

"Oh, Jeannette—Jeannette darling!" The words came pouring out while the little maid of honour clung tightly about her neck. "I have so wanted to come, but they wouldn't let me. They said not till after the funeral. Oh, darling, how are you? How are you?"

"I am quite well," Jeannette said. She kissed Valerie and gently loosened the clinging arms. "There has never been anything the matter with me. Are you all right, dear?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" said Valerie. "I've thought so much about you, dear Jeannette. You're sure you don't mind me coming?"

"But why should I mind?" said Jeannette. "I am pleased."

"Oh, are you?" said Valerie, still clinging to her hand. "How dear of you! I thought—I thought—I thought ——"

"Thought what?" questioned Jeannette, wondering a little at the child's obvious agitation.

"I thought perhaps you might have heard," whispered Valerie, and hid her face against Jeannette's bosom.

"Heard what?" said Jeannette, mystified but somehow failing to feel curious.

"Oh, Jeannette, I—don't know how to tell you," came in accents of distress from the little trembling creature against her heart. "You may be vexed with me. I don't know. But I couldn't—really I couldn't—help it!"

"My dear, what have you been doing?" said Jeannette.

And then quite suddenly, wholly unaccountably, the truth flashed upon her. Her heart gave one hard throb, and did not seem to beat any more.

"I don't know how to tell you," whispered Valerie again, piteously. "I feel as if—as if—I've taken something that belongs by rights to you."

Jeannette moved, almost like an automaton. She put her arms around the girl. "There is nothing in the whole world that belongs to me now, Valerie," she said. "You needn't be troubled about that."

Valerie was crying. She pressed her lips to Jeannette's neck. "I never thought he would ask me," she murmured, "though I did always love him. I couldn't say No when

he did could I, Jeannette? And you did send us home together that night, didn't you—didn't you?"

"Of course I did!" said Jeannette. "I always meant you to have him dear. "I am very glad—very glad."

"Oh, Jeannette, you darling! You are sure?" Valerie's eyes drowned in tears looked up to hers.

Jeannette's eyes shadowed and secret, hiding their depths, looked gravely back. "But you never thought I was in love with Skittles!" she said.

"Of course not! Of course not!" Valerie's eyes began to shine. "You never were! Only I did somehow feel that he ought to have asked you first, because—because—oh, you know Jeannette, I used to feel so sure he meant to."

"He was never serious," said Jeannette.

"Then he ought to have been!" declared Valerie. "But, oh—" in the same breath—"I'm so glad he wasn't. And we're going to India. Won't it be lovely? I'm to start getting my things almost at once, so that we can be married directly it's all arranged. Just fancy, Jeannette! And I never thought I'd get married for years. Isn't it funny how things happen?"

"Yes, it's very funny," said Jeannette.

Swift self-reproach caught Valerie. "Oh what a pig I am! I hate myself. I shouldn't have come, only I wanted so to see you. Darling Jeannette, won't you tell me a little about yourself now?"

"I don't think I have anything to tell," said Jeannette, casting her mind back over the dreadful void of the past few days.

"But how miserable you must be! When I think about you my own darling Jeannette, I feel—I feel that I just can't bear it!" Again the tears were very near.

"Please don't!" said Jeannette. "Think of Skittles in-

stead, and be happy! I want you to be happy, Valerie. You know that, don't you?"

"You're such a darling," said Valerie. "And I am happy,—oh just as happy as I can possibly be."

"I am very glad," said Jeannette.

Her heart was beating normally now, and already she scorned herself for her brief weakness. As if she had ever really cared for Skittles!

She sat down on the couch with Valerie and prepared herself to hear all the outpourings of her eager, girlish heart. It was no great effort to her. Somehow nothing was either easy or difficult just now. She was like a stranded ship driven upon a bar of sand, temporarily out of reach of the tossing waters, but waiting for the next storm to wash her either to destruction or safety.

But Valerie did not remain for long. She promised, she said presently with rosy cheeks, not to stay more than half-an-hour; but she was so glad to have seen her dear Jeannette and might she come again sometime?

"Whenever you like, dear," said Jeannette. "Give Skittles my warmest congratulations and tell him he is a very lucky man!"

"Oh, so you really think he is?" murmured Valerie. "I think the luck is all mine. He is so wonderful, isn't he?"

"Quite unique," said Jeannette, and then she kissed Valerie, who was plainly in a hurry to depart, and went downstairs with her to see her go.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BUCK

The autumn sunlight tempted her, and almost unconsciously she lingered after Valerie had gone. The thought of her father came back to her like a homing bird, never long absent. The first sensation of relief that he had escaped his enemies was giving place to a dull feeling of loss. She was beginning vaguely to want him, to miss the daily care of him which the awful shock of his death had temporarily banished from her mind. She was slowly but surely awaking from her lethargy, becoming aware of suffering. Standing there alone, the wonder that was to torment her for many nights and days loomed like a devouring monster at the back of all her thoughts. His whereabouts, his welfare, his state,—what of these? She wanted news of him. Not for more than three days at a time had she ever been without that before. It oppressed her, this cut-off feeling. Merely to reiterate to herself that he was dead helped her not at all. It conveyed nothing to her. What was death but another form of life, according to the teaching of religion, and according to the unquestionable instinct within her that confirmed that teaching? The misery of ignorance that has tortured so many millions since the world began was just making itself felt. She was conscious of a longing that was almost fierce in its intensity to escape before it became

any worse. She stood, as it were, at the entrance to the torture-chamber, holding back yet feeling that sooner or later, irresistibly she would be compelled to enter.

Somehow, with Valerie's departure, the sense of being forsaken had come upon her. All her world seemed to be falling away from her, crumbling into ruins, and she stood alone in the midst of the desolation, not yet grasping the enormity of the disaster that had befallen her, but becoming more and more aware of that appalling sense of loss and emptiness.

There fell a step on the gravel just out of sight beyond some cypresses, and she drew back sharply. She did not want to be caught here by some casual acquaintance, who would stammer inane condolences to which she would have to make inane reply. Yet the bare consciousness of another human being in the vicinity was a curious comfort to her at that moment, and she lingered in the edge of retreat to see who it was.

She knew, however, before the visitor came into view. There was something familiar beyond all question in the quiet, steady footfall, and a faint frown showed for a second upon Jeannette's forehead. Who would it be but Buck?

Yet she was not wholly displeased to see him. His coming would help her to postpone that evil moment of full and devastating realization so soon now to be faced. The very fact of his presence was in itself a reassurance that all the world had not gone down into that yawning gulf that had swallowed so much.

She certainly had no desire to avoid him, and as he rounded the corner by the cypresses, she stepped forth to meet him.

She saw his face light up at sight of her with the old ready smile that was like the smile of Skittles without its tinge of mockery. There was no doubting the obvi-

ous sincerity of his pleasure as they met. He was always obvious in all his ways.

She found herself smiling in return, for his handclasp comforted her. And at least, with all his faults and drawbacks, he could be trusted not to offer her conventional consolations.

"Are you alone?" said Buck.

She nodded. "They have gone to church. Come in! I have one or two things to talk to you about."

"It's the same with me," said Buck, the cordial smile still at the corners of his eyes. "It is you I have come to see."

Was that presumptuous? The thought flitted through her brain, but she barely considered it. She turned and led the way indoors.

She went back to the sunny sitting room upstairs set apart for her use, Buck silently following. And again a vagrant thought flashed through her mind. He was like a dog at her heels.

She entered her room and went straight to the open window. Buck quietly shut the door and came and stood beside her. Suddenly there seemed to her to be something significant in his silence. She turned with a touch of sharpness and faced him.

"I may as well tell you again," she said, "what you already know, that I am giving up everything to help towards the payment of my father's debts."

"Everything?" said Buck.

His eyes met hers with a grave intentness, as though he were trying to comprehend her. Hers met his with a proud reserve that was not without defiance.

"Everything," she reiterated. "To my mind, there is no other course. Whatever I possess, either now or in the future, must go to that end."

"I see," said Buck.

"Wouldn't you feel the same?" she challenged.

"I don't know," said Buck.

She frowned with swift impatience. "I suppose you have never tried to put yourself in anyone else's place," she said.

"Oh yes, I've tried—sometimes," said Buck. He spoke with his customary gentleness. Her impatience had never had any visible effect upon him. "I think it is very—fine of you," he said after a moment, with a touch of hesitation.

"It is the only thing to do," said Jeannette. "You ought all to get at least something out of the wreck by that means."

He flinched at that, and oddly her heart smote her.

"I didn't say that to hurt you," she said. "But naturally you count with the rest."

"Thank you," said Buck. "And you really think I would take my share under those circumstances—however fractional it might be?"

Jeannette's chin went up. "I think you would have no choice," she said.

"Oh Jeannette!" said Buck.

Something in his tone pierced her. It was as though he had inserted a fine point in her armour that she was powerless to withstand. She stood very still almost as though she were waiting for him to drive it home.

But Buck said no more and in the next moment she had recovered herself, shielding the weak spot with an arrogance that was not wholly genuine.

"In any case," she said, "that is a matter of very small importance. I merely wish you to understand that that is the course I intend to pursue and I shall look to you to help me if necessity arises."

"I will always help you—if you will let me," said Buck.

She frowned again. Was he naturally so foolish or

did he wilfully misconstrue her words? "I mean of course from a business point of view—solely," she said with emphasis.

"Yes. I thought you meant that," said Buck.

And again he said no more, but waited, gravely courteous, for her to continue.

She did so after a few seconds with slight effort. "Lady Varleigh is more than kind. She would give me a home here, but of course I am not going to accept it."

"Why not?" said Buck.

Her chin went up again. "And live on charity?" she said.

"I think the charity would be of your bestowing," he said.

That surprised her. For once in his life he had struck a note of originality; for of his sincerity there could never be any doubt.

"In what way?" she said.

"Don't you realize how deeply Lady Varleigh loves you?" he rejoined with simplicity.

"Oh, that!" she said. "But then——"

She broke off, abruptly realizing the futility of attempting to convince him that his point of view was too eccentric to be considered for a moment.

He did not—apparently—read her thought, for as she paused, he went on, almost as if she had not spoken. "It would be the greatest joy to her in her old age to have you for her constant companion and friend. Not what you would choose of course, but if we believe that God has anything at all to do with our affairs, we are bound to admit sometimes that His way is better than ours. Doesn't it seem to you that this is the way that He has provided for you? Wouldn't it be worth while to try it—anyhow for a time—before you turn it down?"

She was more than surprised this time, she was amazed

by his effrontery. That Buck of all people should dare to preach to her! For a moment she had no words. Then, frigidly: "Are you trying to point out my duty?" she asked.

He turned fully to her at that with a suddenness that was somehow disconcerting. "No! I am not thinking of duty," he said. "None but oneself can ever decide that. I am thinking of you—of you—choosing all the while to tread the hardest path when you might be saved so much misery if you only would—if you only would!" There was a quiver of deep feeling in his voice.

"What do you mean?" said Jeannette.

He made a sharp gesture as though he curbed himself with difficulty, and she saw that he was trembling. "How am I to tell you what I mean," he said, "when I know you won't listen? I am the last person in the world—isn't that so?—from whom you would dream of taking a word of advice. Yet, Jeannette, if you would only listen to me just once, instead of condemning unheard—" Again his voice quivered, and he paused to steady it. Then, with almost exaggerated quietness: "I'm a fool, I know, to talk like this," he said. "I meant to put it quite differently. But at least acquit me of criticising your actions! I only intended to offer you an alternative which you might be disposed to accept. If I have offended you, please forgive me!"

Jeannette was looking at him in her level, unembarrassed fashion. She betrayed no surprise at his words. "What is the alternative that you are suggesting?" she asked, after a moment. "Not that I should live on indefinitely with Lady Varleigh?"

"No," said Buck.

Again he braced himself and she knew, though by no outward sign, that he was facing a considerable ordeal when he spoke again.

"It is very difficult to say it, Jeannette, without giving offence. But I beg you to believe that nothing is further from my intention. I think you know that I have loved you, without much hope of winning you, for a very long time. No," at a slight movement on her part, "please listen to me—this once! I will never again speak to you of love without your permission. I know very well that I am as far now from winning you—in the real sense of the word—as I have ever been. But, since all this trouble came upon you, it has occurred to me that you might be willing to enter into a pact with me, to confer upon me a very great privilege without incurring any very serious humiliation to yourself in so doing. Do you see what I am driving at, I wonder? I am only asking for the right to serve you, and it is all I shall ever ask—more than I have ever really hoped to obtain. Just to protect you from the world—to save you from the effects of this awful disaster."

He spoke with great earnestness, but no longer with agitation. There was indeed a certain dignity in his utterance which had its effect upon Jeannette. Almost in spite of herself she listened with a measure of respect. Somehow—although so ordinary—he was different from the rest; humbler yet more assertive, if that were possible. She could not dismiss him without due consideration, and neither could she take offence.

"Are you offering to marry me?" she said.

She was aware that his hands clenched at her question. Yet still he showed none of his former agitation.

"If you will stoop to accept me," he said, "I swear to God that I will never give you cause to regret it. And I swear to you most solemnly that the right to protect you and serve you is all that I shall ever ask."

That moved her in a fashion that she could not have explained. Foolish, even absurd as he was, yet his

sincerity and his simplicity had their appeal. He was centuries out of date, yet he somehow managed to touch the sublime. She regarded him with the kindness with which one might regard the vagaries of a highly imaginative but lovable child. She had certainly never liked him so much as in that moment.

"How very sweet of you, Buck!" she said, and gave him her hand. "I can't do it of course—of course," very impressively as his clasp warned her of possible misunderstanding. "But it is the most generous thing I ever heard of. Thank you for thinking of it, but I couldn't—of course I couldn't—consider the idea for a single moment."

"Not for one moment?" he said sadly.

She smiled at him with a hint of the old hard brightness. "If you know me at all, you never really expected it. Do I really seem to you the sort of person to accept all and give nothing?"

"You would give very much," said Buck in his slow honest way. "I won't insult you by imagining that you could make such a sacrifice easily. I only dared to hope that you might be capable of making it. I see I was wrong. I will never suggest it again."

She withdrew her hand with a touch of hauteur. "Your point of view is always so extraordinary," she said. "Most men would have realized that such a suggestion was utterly—completely—out of the question before making it."

"I know," said Buck, and she saw a look of pain on his brown face that somehow rebuked her. "But—it was my only chance—just a forlorn hope. I won't repeat the

offence ever again, and I hope you will manage to forgive though I don't want you to forget."

"What do you mean by that?" said Jeannette.

He smiled at her. "I would just like you to remember," he said, "that I am always ready, always—you know—standing by."

Again she was touched, and in that moment a strange regret pierced her. If only he had not been so hopelessly dull! Almost in spite of herself she melted again.

"I shall never forget your kindness," she said. "I hope very much that you will soon find somebody much more suitable than I am to marry you and make you happy."

His smile passed. He replied very quietly. "There is no one in the world but you, Jeannette. There never will be."

"What nonsense!" she said.

He made a quaint gesture of humility. "It is the stuff of which I am made," he said.

"Well, you can't blame me for that," said Jeannette with a quickness that surprised herself.

"I should never dream of blaming you," said Buck. He paused a moment, then with slight diffidence: "Now will you tell me," he said, "—do you mind telling me—what you are thinking of doing?"

It was the first direct question she had received upon the subject, and it caught her unawares though she betrayed no discomfiture.

"I am going to find work of some kind," she said.

"Yes, I know," said Buck gently. "But what?"

A sharp sense of misgiving that was utterly unfamiliar to her assailed her for a second. She dismissed it with regal assurance.

"I shall probably take up secretarial work," she said. "I have hardly had time to give the matter my serious consideration, but no doubt I shall find something."

"Will you let me know when you have decided?" said Buck.

"Why?" said Jeannette.

"Just in case I can be of any use to you," he said.

She looked at him. "What could you possibly do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I might do something. Give me the chance, anyhow!"

Again his tone softened her, as it were against her will. She held out her hand to him again, but this time it was a gesture of dismissal. "I will certainly ask for your help if I need it," she said.

For the second time his hand closely clasped hers. He bent slightly towards her. "Jeannette!" His voice came huskily, as though it fought its way through some obstruction. "If you are ever stranded—sick or sorry or just—destitute and alone—will you—will you send and tell me? Will you, Jeannette? For God's sake—promise!"

She met the entreaty of his look with a conscious effort. His persistence troubled her. She set herself against it with all her strength. As if she would ever go to Buck for help! The idea was preposterous. She had a feeling of indignation that he should put this fresh strain upon her.

For a few seconds she said nothing whatever, then sharply she released her hand. "Oh, what is the good of talking like this?" she said. "I can't promise what I know I shall never do."

He drew back. "I would never ask you to," he said. "Forgive me if I have said too much! I am very anxious

about you. But that, I know, is beside the point. Would you like me to go?"

"I don't think there is any more to be said," said Jeannette.

"At least you have promised to send for me if you should ever want me," he said. "I must be content with that." He turned to the door. "You will keep that promise at least?"

"I am not in the habit of breaking my promises," said Jeannette regally.

She half expected him to turn again to apologize, but the soft closing of the door told her that he had gone, and with a sharp sigh she sat down at her writing-table and leaned her arms upon it. It had been a trying interview, and now that it was over the sense of loss was pressing back upon her. She had a desperate feeling that she must do something violent to free herself before it took entire possession. The longing for her father had become like a living thing tearing at her very heart-strings. She had refused all remedies, and it was scarcely to be borne. A wild idea of calling to Buck to come back —to come back—not to leave her in this awful desert of loneliness—clutched her for a few seconds. She fought it tensely with set teeth and hands hard clenched. Anything—oh, anything rather than that! She summoned all her pride to help her, all her courage to quell the sudden panic that had sprung upon her like an evil beast out of darkness. But though she conquered the impulse to cry out, the anguish remained, forcing its way deeper and deeper into her soul. This was to be her portion now,—shame and suffering such as she had never known before. The cup of bitterness was held to her lips and she must

drain it to the dregs. No one could spare her now. There was no deliverance. Only her father could have given her that, and he had passed beyond her reach, beyond all knowledge of her agony.

She started to her feet with outflung arms, urged by a misery past endurance. He could not be so far away as that—that beloved being about whom all her fondest thoughts had ever centred. He could not have deserted her thus, leaving her this legacy of shame. It was unthinkable, it was almost absurd, fantastic as an evil dream.

"O God!" she said. "Am I mad? Am I mad?"

There came no answer, and her arms fell. The dreadful silence girt her round. She had sent them all away now. She was alone—alone.

She began to walk up and down the room, and it was as though she paced a prison cell.

"I must get away," she said feverishly. "I can't stop here. I shall go crazy if I do."

Her knees were shaking, but she forced them on, for she could not be still. Somewhere deep within her a raging fire seemed to be burning, torturing her, consuming her. This anguish of shame—it was becoming more than she could bear. Little gibing voices were beginning to make themselves heard in her brain—the voices that come when sleep has long been denied.

"Jeannette Wyngold—the banker's daughter!" So went that devils' chorus. "The greatest swindler of the age! The man who cheated half England! This is his daughter—his daughter! She is trying to earn her living, but who will employ the daughter of Norman Wyngold?"

And then there was mocking laughter—laughter that jangled and echoed through her brain, making her wince

—while a single voice took up the awful chant that was somehow like an oratorio which she must have heard some time in the far-off past before the cataclysm.

"The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children."

When she heard that, a new thought came to her—outside her own suffering—alone and beyond all personal thought. She went to the window, lifting her drawn, white face to the soft blue overhead, and so standing, she uttered the first deep prayer of her life.

"O God," she said, "let it be so! Let it be so! Visit his sin upon me—and let him go free!"

All her soul was in that prayer, and in some fashion it eased her, bringing to her a feeling that was almost peace. The terrible sense of shame left her for a space, the agony of bereavement was stilled.

"He is safe!" she whispered to herself. "He is safe!"

And though it was she who uttered the words, she felt as if an angel had spoken to her soul.

The misery would return—the heartache and the loss—nothing could prevent that; but that reaching out to the Divine had helped her, and she was strangely comforted. Just for those few quiet seconds she was "not far from the kingdom of heaven."

# PART III

## CHAPTER I

### THE FOOL

"I SHALL find work," Jeannette had said on the day after her father's funeral.

Six weeks later she paced the terrace at Varleigh Park when the first nip of winter was in the air, and asked herself desperately what there was in all the wide world that she could find to do.

Sir Philip and Lady Varleigh were leaving at length for the south of France, having already deferred their departure on her account. For to Lady Varleigh's grief, Jeannette had steadfastly refused to accompany them. She must work, she said, she must work; and it was as though she were driven by a fever that gave her no rest. Her pale face with its fixed look of tragedy troubled Lady Varleigh. She would gladly have remained in the country, but Sir Philip, the doctor, and Jeannete herself all combined to make her go. "You know that you could never stand an English winter," the girl said. "And why should you try? There is nothing to keep you here."

"There is you, darling," protested Lady Varleigh.

But to this Jeannette firmly refused to listen. "You have been much too good to me as it is," she said. "It

will be better for me to be on my own. I shall find my feet all right. It is just what I need."

"Ah! If you do!" sighed Lady Varleigh. "But it is very, very difficult for a girl in your position. What can you possibly find to do?"

"I am not helpless," said Jeannette proudly. "And so long as it is honest work, I don't mind what it is."

"Ah, my dear, you don't know—you don't know!" said Lady Varleigh.

So far as her own movements were concerned, however, she was overruled by force of numbers, and so on that wintry day Jeannette paced the terrace alone while within the house preparations went forward for the coming departure of her friends. She had rigidly adhered to her resolve to keep nothing for herself out of her father's private estate. Starfields was for sale and all that she possessed went with it, her car, her horse, even her jewels. Upon this point Jeannette was immovable. She would retain nothing of all that had ever come to her from her father, refusing resolutely to reap any benefit, however indirect, from the crime that had been committed for her sake.

"I have no right to it," she said. And when they tried to point out to her that not all Norman Wyngold's wealth had been derived from fraud she simply refused the discussion. She was her father's daughter, and as such she shouldered the crushing burden that he had left behind.

"I can't pay back in full," she said, "but I will make such restitution as lies in my power."

And then, her decision made, she sought for work.

No one knew what she endured during those six weeks that succeeded her father's death. Grave and composed, she maintained an inflexible front to all the world, and none saw her falter. Even Lady Varleigh, tenderly as she watched her, never detected any sign of weakness.

"I am quite well," Jeannette always declared in reply to her fond enquiries. "I shall be better still when I have found work."

But neither she nor Lady Varleigh fully realized the difficulties of the quest until six weeks of fruitless effort had passed.

Then indeed, though she would not own herself daunted even to her friend, the dread of failure which had been secretly gnawing at her heart for so long began to assume formidable proportions. Walking to and fro, to and fro, on the sheltered terrace, she began to ask herself with something that was almost panic if there were anything at all that she was fitted for. She had applied for various posts and considered many others, but to each one of them there was invariably some circumstance attached that disqualified her, some particular training necessary which she had never acquired. And hope and pride together were beginning to sink very low.

Once in her pacing she stopped and looked across at the old grey Hall looming through the wintry mist. She had seen very little of Buck since the day she had sent him away. He had come once or twice to discuss certain matters of business which he had undertaken for her, but except for that they had not met, and no intimate conversation of any kind had passed between them.

Poor Buck! He had done his best. A little pang of self-reproach went through her. She certainly had not overwhelmed him with gratitude. She was aware at that moment of a curious desire to see him. Not that he could possibly advise her in this difficulty. He would assuredly say the wrong thing if she allowed him to express himself at all; yet even to hear him making his usual blunders would have somehow been a help just then, would have quieted somehow that scared sense of doubt and insecurity that tormented her.

But she knew as certainly as if he had told her so that he would not come unless she sent for him, and that she could never do. She turned and paced on, shaking the thought of him from her impatiently. After all, what could he possibly do or say to help?

To please Lady Varleigh, or rather to calm her distress over leaving her, she had promised to stay on at Varleigh Park until she found the work of which she was in search; but she was firmly determined that her sojourn should not be long. The past six weeks had been almost unendurable, and she even looked forward to her friend's departure so that she could be entirely unhampered in her efforts to find employment. With dear Lady Varleigh gone, she would be her own mistress and at liberty to strain every nerve to attain the independence which she so greatly desired. It was with this thought that she strove to reassure herself and banish that cold dread which was becoming her almost constant companion. Surely in the great world of workers, there must be some niche for her, if she could but find it! In calmer moments it seemed ridiculous that she—the gifted, the popular, the accomplished society girl—should be thus through no fault of her own thrust outside the pale. It was true that, capable as she was, she had never trained for any particular branch of work; she held no certificates and had never studied shorthand or typewriting.

And there was no time now to learn. She wanted to be self-supporting immediately. Whatever she did must bring in some return at once. Her sorely-wounded pride demanded that, cried out for it. The bare thought that she was at present living upon the bounty of friends was like a poison in her veins.

"I have no right to live at all unless I can work," she said.

The mist that shrouded the Park was turning to a fine

rain with the falling of night. The chill dusk wrapped her round. She thought suddenly of her father, sitting by the study-fire over at Starfields waiting for her as he had so often waited, and sharply, ere she could stop it, a sob rose in her throat. Oh for that departed vision! Oh for the feel and sight of him again! To put her arms about him—to draw the silvery head to her breast—to know his need of her—to answer it with all her heart's quick love!

She felt the hot tears welling up, and she could not stay them. Perhaps it did not matter for once, for there were none to see. And she was tired—O God, how tired she was!—of life with its bitter grief and disappointment and failure.

She had read in the paper that morning of Lord Conister's departure for Africa on a big-game expedition, and it had wrung her heart just a little more to know him gone. Not that she cared for Hugh! All that was long, long past. It belonged to another world, another existence. Yet his going was as the severing of another link between her and the old happy life in which she had reigned supreme and he had been the most courtly of her courtiers. The tears were running down her face now, and she stamped upon the ground in impotent anger with herself. Fool! Fool! When she did not care—she did not care —whether he went or stayed!

Again the fever drove her. She turned and almost ran along the terrace, and as she went she flung the thought of Hugh away and clasped her grief, which was so infinitely more precious, to her quivering heart. The coldness and the darkness girt her round. She stopped at the further end, and sinking down upon the low stone balustrade she sobbed out her agony alone, broken at last.

Many minutes later, when she could weep no more, she lifted her head and stared blindly into the night. She

was shivering violently, but she felt too weak to move. The awful sense of being forsaken pressed upon her like a weight which she could never hope to lift. She faced the thought that by this time to-morrow she would indeed be utterly and completely alone.

Again for no particular reason the thought of Buck came to her—Buck who had always been present when not wanted, and now——

What was that? The creak of a boot on the grass below her—yes, undoubtedly, the creak of a boot! Her heart gave a curious throb. The last time she had seen him she had wondered irritably how he could possibly endure that creak always with him. And now! She heard it again. He was mounting the steps on to the terrace, and suddenly the flare of an electric torch shot out in front of him. She wondered why he came that way, and then realized that he was waving the light to and fro as though in search of something.

She knew that in a moment he was bound to discover her, and with an instinct of self-preservation she rose to her feet and discovered herself.

"Good evening, Buck!"

She wondered if her voice sounded normal, and decided thankfully that even if it did not he was the last person on earth to notice anything unusual either in that or her appearance.

He flashed his light towards her, and instantly lowered it. She was sure he had not seen her face.

"Good evening, Jeannette!" he said in his pleasant unsuspicious fashion. "Taking the air before the rain comes? We're in for a wet night by the look of it."

That reassured her greatly; for Buck had never been tactful in his life. If he had been aware of her distress, he would most certainly have come blundering forward with foolish offers of help. It was typical enough that he

should appear at all at such a time. He had never been happy in that respect, she reflected. It was always the wrong moment with him!

"Are you looking for something?" she asked him, without much interest.

"I was," said Buck, and stooped to pick up something in his path. "I've got it now, thanks. It isn't really what I came for, but as I had to come, I thought I might as well—" He broke off, evidently realizing her lack of sympathy. "I've come to see Sir Philip," he said. "Is he inside?"

"I believe so," said Jeannette. "I really don't know. He is very busy, wherever he is."

"Oh, yes, I know," said Buck. "Off first thing to-morrow, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Jeannette.

"Pity you're not going too!" said Buck.

It was the last thing he ought to have said. Something in her desolate heart caught at the words and passionately echoed them. If only she had consented to go too! But she would never admit that regret to Buck. She closed her lips very tightly and said nothing.

He stood beside her absently switching his torch on and off. She longed to snatch it from him and hurl it away among the garden-beds, fearing that any moment he might be idiotic enough to turn it upon her face with its piteous stains of grief.

"Shall I tell you what I have come to see Sir Philip about?" he asked her suddenly, and she realized with something of a shock that he was not thinking of her at all, only of himself and his own dull doings.

Yet she did not want to snub him too heavily. She said, "Well?" in a listless tone that left him quite at liberty to proceed or not as he thought fit.

He turned slightly towards her, still fidgeting with his

torch. "I am going to tell him that he can buy the old Hall," he said, "as soon as he likes."

That roused her effectually. It was the very last piece of news she had expected. "Good gracious!" she said. "I thought that was the one thing you never would do!"

"Yes," said Buck, and his tone was sad. "I thought so too once. But—times change, you know. And my brothers agree with me that it is folly to hang on to the old place when we can get a decent price for it."

"But still—" said Jeannette.

The news had shocked her in a way she could not explain. The old Hall and Buck had always seemed such imperishable landmarks.

"What shall you do?" she said abruptly.

"I?" said Buck. "Oh, I shall find work of some kind. At least I shall try. I think possibly I have rather been wasting my time here if the truth were told. Don't you?"

"I really don't know," said Jeannette, unable to rid herself of the feeling that here was some fresh disaster about to befall her. "I don't suppose you will find anything."

"Well, I can but try," said Buck. He paused a moment; then: "Bandy is rather keen on leaving the Army and the two of us going to South Africa to try our hands at farming," he said.

That startled Jeannette in earnest. She spoke with vehemence. "You couldn't—surely—contemplate doing anything so utterly idiotic!" she said. "Let Bandy go if he wants, but you—" she stopped.

"Why not me?" said Buck.

She could not answer him very adequately. "It seems ridiculous somehow," she said.

"You mean I am not the sort to get on anywhere?" he suggested.

She uttered a faint laugh. "Yes, partly that."

"Not entirely?" said Buck.

She hesitated, face to face with the undoubted fact that she did not want him to go. This awful sense of being forsaken was making a coward of her, who till now had always been so self-reliant.

She collected herself with an effort. "I think it would be a great pity if you did anything of that kind," she said judicially. "You would probably lose all your money and gain nothing at all. And there is another point which possibly you haven't yet considered. Do you know that Sir Philip would only buy the old Hall to pull it down?"

Buck sighed. "Yes, I know. But I can't go on living there, so it's no good squirming over that."

"Why can't you go on living there?" demanded Jeannette.

"I can't afford to for one thing," he said. "And I don't want to for another."

"Don't want to!" she echoed incredulously.

"Not with you gone from Starfields," said Buck.

"Oh, but how ridiculous!" she said. Yet her heart gave a quick beat of relief. "That is absurd, you know, —quite absurd."

"I daresay," said Buck. "It's my sentiments anyway."

"You're acting upon impulse," said Jeannette. "You haven't thought it properly over."

Buck turned fully towards her. "Will you tell me something?" he asked respectfully.

"Certainly, if I can," said Jeannette, and the old lofty feeling was with her for the moment. Poor fool! He needed guidance.

"Were you acting on impulse," said Buck, "that day you turned me down?"

Her indignation rose at once to meet the occasion, but she kept it within bounds. For none but a fool would

have asked such a question as that, and no sensible being wastes anger upon fools.

"I was not," she said.

Buck switched off his torch and they stood in darkness. "My decision dates from then," he said.

The rain was beginning to patter around them. In a few moments it would be a downpour. It was absurd to linger. Jeannette turned upon her heel.

"Shall we go in?" she said, over her shoulder.

"By all means," said Buck, and with humble dignity followed her.

## CHAPTER II

### LADY VARLEIGH TO THE RESCUE

"My dear!" said Lady Varleigh. "Have you been out in all this wet? You shouldn't, dear! You shouldn't! There, let Marie change your wet shoes, and come in and have some tea!"

Jeannette dropped wearily into the chair drawn up for her before the fire. Her talk with Buck had restored her composure, but the tempest of grief through which she had passed had shaken her to the depths. She was unutterably tired.

"Poor darling!" said Lady Varleigh, with shrewd eyes taking in every detail. "I wish you had come in sooner. I had no idea where you were, or I would have fetched you myself. Be quick, Marie! Miss Wyngold and I want to talk."

Jeannette did not feel the smallest desire for conversation, but she let the statement pass. There was one thing to be said for Lady Varleigh. At least she never talked nonsense. Neither did she rush headlong at her subject, however urgent, before she made ample provision against interruption.

On the present occasion she gave Jeannette her tea and saw her begin to drink it before she uttered another word. She had ever been a great believer in the as-

sistance of creature comforts towards attaining a reasonable frame of mind.

"Now, dear, are you more comfortable?" she asked at length. "Because I have really something rather interesting to discuss with you. You're looking so tired, poor darling! It won't be too much for you?"

"Of course not!" said Jeannette.

"Well, dear!" Lady Varleigh settled herself with her feet on the fender. "First of all, I have a small confession to make—really a small one, Jeannette, so I hope you will be good and take it nicely."

Jeannette looked at her with faint interest. "You have been doing something I shouldn't want you to do," she said.

Lady Varleigh made a deprecatory gesture with her hands. "Exactly, dear, I have. My only excuse is that I just had to." Her tone was not without satisfaction.

"Perhaps it won't matter," said Jeannette wearily.

"Wait, dear! Wait and see!" protested Lady Varleigh. "Don't condemn me unheard! It concerns you very intimately. I may say it concerns us both."

A glint of mischief shone in her dark eyes. She had almost a girlish look, and Jeannette saw very clearly for a second or two the charm which is greater than beauty in her smile.

It compelled a smile in return, and she gave it ungrudgingly. "Lady Varleigh the Invincible!" she said. "What have you been doing?"

Lady Varleigh chuckled to herself. "I'll tell you all about it," she said. "I must tell you, darling, that for your sake I have broken an oath I once made. And I am not a bit sorry. Also, I don't think the recording angel will make a great fuss about it, considering my motives which were most unusually blameless."

"But what have you been doing?" said Jeannette.

Lady Varleigh chuckled again. "You must let me tell you in my own way, dear, because I am rather excited to-night. Imagine an old woman of my age, Jeannette, receiving a love-letter—such an epistle as dear Sir Philip could never have thought of, and from another woman's husband too! The immorality of it! It's like a draught of wine! It has made me young again. If I were to see him to-night, Jeannette, I believe I could set his blood on fire in the old way." Her eyes kindled to a brighter flame.

"You will never be anything but young," said Jeannette.

"Thank you, dear. But I don't flatter myself to that extent. The candle is burning low, but it still flickers now and again." She leaned forward and patted Jeannette's hand. "Now I am going to tell you where you come in," she said. "I have been very anxious about you, darling, as perhaps you know, and I have been trying to think of any possible way in which I could help you. I have lain awake almost as much as you have, my dear, which is saying much. And the upshot of it is that in the end I got desperate and broke my vow never to hold any intimate communication with Jervis Kingswold again, (it was twenty years old, dear, and, as I say, I don't think the recording angel will pay much attention to an old woman like me)—I got desperate I say, and wrote and told him all about it. I spread myself, Jeannette. It was so lovely to be writing to him again. I told him just everything, how dear you were to me, how grieved I was about you, how full of anxiety for your future. I told him—Jeannette, I told him—that you were as a daughter to me, such a daughter as the man I loved might once have given me. I had to say that, darling, for I wanted him to know just what you are to me. Will you forgive me for saying that, Jeannette?"

Jeannette leaned to her without words and kissed her.

"Bless you, my dear," said Lady Varleigh. "Well, the result was a letter which arrived this afternoon—such a precious letter, but I daren't keep it lest other eyes than mine should read it when I am gone. Not that Sir Philip would mind; it isn't that. He is such a dear good man that he would probably laugh at it, and no one must ever laugh, Jeannette. It is too holy for that—the biggest and purest thing of my life, which I have kept free from every stain of earthliness. So great a treasure, darling, that only eyes like yours may ever look upon! His letter—no, not even you may read his letter. It is so full of tenderness and understanding—'the perfect harmony'—" Lady Varleigh very suddenly pulled out her handkerchief and sneezed with vigour. "Dear, dear, I really mustn't drivel on any longer," she said. "It is your affairs we are talking about, isn't it? Well, darling, in reply to my enquiry as to whether he could tell me of some suitable post for you, he says that he believes he can—if you really don't mind what you do."

"So long as it isn't charity!" said Jeannette.

Lady Varleigh smiled at her fondly. "That bugbear of yours! No, no, it is very far from it, dear. It is in fact a species of servitude which wouldn't appeal to me in the least, but may answer the purpose of a stop-gap for you, my Jeannette, till you can find something better. He has a daughter—Dorothea; a spoilt little creature, rather like her mother, I fear. She had an operation some little time ago, and has had to lead an invalid existence ever since. But she is getting better, and they want to substitute some sort of young society in place of that of the hospital nurse she has had till now. It isn't much of a post, dear, but there is no special training required, and he will be very pleased to offer it to you if you think you would care to fill it."

"As companion," said Jeannette.

"Only as a stop-gap," said Lady Varleigh anxiously. "It could scarcely be a permanent post in any case, for the girl is seventeen and will probably come out in another year if her health allows. But it would give you time to look about you, wouldn't it, dear? If you don't like it,—well, you can always come back to me. You would do that of course, Jeannette, for any holiday you might have. That is understood, isn't it, darling? I can't part with you for good."

"You are much too kind to me," said Jeannette.

Lady Varleigh sighed. "It's nothing to what I'd like to be. But it's no use going over old ground. You will take this—to please me, won't you, dear? I shall never rest easy unless you do."

"I should like to think it over," said Jeannette.

Lady Varleigh turned and laid a beseeching hand on her arm. "Don't, darling! Please don't! Whatever you may decide to do for yourself afterwards, do this for me now, and set my tired old mind at rest! You know, Jeannette, there are times when thought of your future appalls me. You think you know the world so well. But you don't, dear, you don't. I pray God to safeguard you every night."

"How good of you!" Jeannette said, touched.

"Ah, then won't you do this for me in return?" urged Lady Varleigh with tears in her voice. "It isn't what I would choose for you, my precious. It would be far better for you now if you decided to marry poor dear Buck. But there, I've done—I've done!" hastily, as Jeannette's face showed signs of hardening. "You have made your decision, and I won't try to turn you from it. Only I do beg you—I do beseech you, my Jeannette—take this post that is offered you! It is at least safe, and it will be a beginning for you. Indeed it is worth having. You can't afford to let it slip."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Jeannette said again with a touch of bitterness.

"Ah, don't put it that way!" said Lady Varleigh softly. "Tell me that you love me too much to refuse me! I should value that so much."

"Dear Lady Varleigh!" Jeannette clasped the pleading hand on her arm. "How could anyone refuse you, I wonder?"

"That means you'll do it!" said Lady Varleigh, and drew a deep breath of relief. "Now I shall sleep again. And, darling, he wants to know if you will travel up to town with us to-morrow, so that I can be there to introduce you to each other. If you like each other, Jeannette, you can go to them at once."

"You take my breath away!" said Jeannette.

"But it is rather urgent, isn't it, darling? There is no time to be lost. Dear, dear! How I have fretted at the thought of leaving you behind! And there was no need after all. Have you ever noticed, dear, how very often we disquiet ourselves in vain?"

"I don't know," said Jeannette.

"You're tired, dear. We won't talk any more, but just tell Marie to pack your things and we shall all go up to town together to-morrow. Now I wonder what Sir Philip is doing. I think I must go and tell him."

"I can tell you what he is doing," said Jeannette. "He is talking to Buck."

"Buck! Is he here? When did he come? Have you seen him, dear?"

"Yes, I saw him." Jeannette spoke with deliberate indifference. "I know what he has come for too. He made no secret of it, so I can tell you."

"My dear, what?" Lady Varleigh looked at her with eyes in which hope renewed shone brazenly.

Jeannette uttered a grim little laugh at the sight. "No,

he hasn't come to enlist Sir Philip's services on his behalf. I should think even Buck would realize the futility of that. He has merely come to offer him the old Hall, as he and his brothers have decided that it isn't worth keeping."

"Oh, Jeannette!" Surprise and pain sounded in Lady Varleigh's voice. "That is because of you," she said.

Jeannette slightly shrugged her shoulders; it was a gesture that recalled the days when she ruled supreme. "I repudiate all responsibility," she said. "He was made a fool, and doubtless he will continue one to the end."

"A fool—to love you! Oh, Jeannette!" said Lady Varleigh again.

Jeannette looked up at her through lashes that almost completely veiled her eyes. "For that reason more than any other," she said, "—a fool."

"I give you up," said Lady Varleigh.

"Let us hope he will now have the sense to do the same!" said Jeannette.

## CHAPTER III

### THE JOURNEY

And so it came about that in the morning when the travellers departed, accompanied by a stack of luggage which caused Sir Philip to fume irritably and Lady Varleigh to laugh with comfortable satisfaction, Jeannette went also, pale and quiet and steady, braced for her first experience in the matter of earning her living.

The fact that Buck travelled up by the same train caused her some slight annoyance, but Lady Varleigh was careful to explain to her that this was a purely business arrangement between him and Sir Philip, since they were anxious to set matters in legal train for the transference of the Bentbridge Hall property before the latter left England. As they were spending the night in town, it made it possible to do this, and it therefore seemed a sensible proceeding. Did not Jeannette think so?

"I think he is being absurdly headlong," said Jeannette shortly. "But it's his own affair."

"Quite, dear, quite," agreed Lady Varleigh, and anxiously turned the subject.

She was in good spirits herself, for the day was bright, and the prospect of leaving England held for her "a vast allurement" as she expressed it. "I have always had an adventurous mind," was another of her sayings, which,

as Jeannette remarked, was another way of expressing the fact that the magic of eternal youth was hers.

She too looked forward with interest to the end of their journey, but with sentiments very different from those of Lady Varleigh, and the presence of Buck embarrassed her in a fashion which she could not have explained, save that she desired to make her new venture entirely untrammelled by old associations.

Sir Jervis Kingswold had accepted a telephone invitation to lunch at the Varleighs' hotel, but his wife, to Lady Varleigh's open delight, could not accompany him.

"Such a mercy, dear!" as she said. "He will show to far greater advantage without her, and I do want you to like him."

Jeannette wondered if she would. Her memory of Sir Jervis was of a gaunt, clean-shaven man with a high intellectual forehead and heavy eyes that had a look of melancholy. At the Bar he bore the reputation of being one of the most astute counsels of the day. His eloquence and his amazing skill at cross-examination had placed him in the fore-front of the crowd. There were very few people to whom his name was not well-known.

Personally, Jeannette could scarcely be said to know him. She had occasionally seen him at large social functions during the London season, but she had never exchanged a word with him. She had only once met his wife, who had seemed to her pale and characterless, so much so indeed that she could summon no vivid recollection of her. If her daughter were the same, her task would hardly be an attractive one. But, as Lady Varleigh said, it was but a temporary engagement, and she would have a much better chance in town of finding some employment more to her taste.

Sir Philip and Buck, seated on the other side of the carriage, were conversing in low tones together. From

behind her paper, half-contemptuous and half-curious, she watched the latter, and decided, not for the first time, that his face was the most uninteresting that she had ever looked upon. The resemblance to Skittles irritated her, for the sparkling vivacity characteristic of the younger brother was so conspicuously absent in Buck as to emphasize his native dulness to a very marked degree. She was getting tired of Buck, she told herself. It would really be something of a relief not to have to look upon that ordinary face for a little while. And at that point, with an odd stab of dismay, another thought struck her. That South African project—was he still pursuing that? Had he come up to town to make arrangements for that also? He was idiot enough for anything, she commented to herself rather desperately. And he had not said that he would relinquish it on the previous night. She suddenly realized that she would have to find out before the end of the journey, and wondered how she could do so without appearing to take too much interest in his proceedings.

The thought made her terminate her scrutiny and return to her paper somewhat abruptly. To let him imagine for one moment that she took any interest in him at all was very far from her intention. He was ready enough to take full advantage of the confidential position to which he had managed to attain, as it was.

Yet her desire for enlightenment with regard to that absurd South African scheme remained, and she could see no means of satisfying it without humbling herself to ask a direct question.

Buck himself, however, settled the matter before they arrived at their destination. A few minutes before they were due at the terminus he quitted Sir Philip and moved to the vacant place opposite to her.

"I have heard of this venture of yours," he said. "May I wish it every success?"

She smiled at him. They were so near the end of the journey that she could afford to be gracious.

"It may be a stepping-stone to something better," she said. "I scarcely regard it as anything else."

"I know Sir Jervis Kingswold," said Buck. "He is a very fine man in his own line."

She wondered what he meant by the last words, but would not flatter him by asking.

He continued with slight hesitation. "Will you let me say that I think you are wonderful—splendid—to take up work in this fashion? Not one in a thousand would have done it.

This was presumption of course, and of a kind that Jeannette would not tolerate. She regarded him coldly. "There I do not agree with you," she said.

"Never mind!" said Buck tactlessly, with a smile. "The sentiment remains unaltered on my side. And at least I may hope that everything will go well with you and that you will find the happiness that you deserve."

"That is very kind of you," said Jeannette conventionally.

"I chance to mean it," said Buck, looking straight at her with honest grey eyes that did not attempt to hide their devotion. "I wonder—will you let me come and see you sometimes?"

The question startled her. She was aware of a sudden warmth at her heart of which she was immediately ashamed. She forced herself to coldness lest once more he should take an unfair advantage.

"I thought you were going to South Africa," she said.

"I shan't go yet," said Buck.

She gave him a keen darting look from beneath brows that were slightly drawn. "Have you given up the idea then?" she said.

"Not altogether," said Buck.

That made her angry. It was so like him, so foolish and ineffectual. "You may come and say good-bye to me," she said, "when you have made up your mind to go."

"I certainly won't before," said Buck, and laughed pleasantly. "It's a beastly business, isn't it?—this making up one's mind. I expect, after all, Bandy will have to go without me."

Jeannette nearly said, "How futile!" but refrained.

"Well, I take it I may come and see you sometimes until I go?" said Buck.

An insane impulse sprang up within her to answer, "As often as you like!" She fought it with a fierce determination that increased the grimness of her face.

"Mayn't I?" said Buck with humility.

She answered him with an effort which she felt to be obvious. "I can't prevent your doing so if you wish."

"But I wouldn't come without your permission," said Buck.

"Oh, don't be so silly!" said Jeannette, goaded at length past endurance.

The words were out before she could recall them, and she was furious both with him and with herself for their utterance. He would be sure to put a wrong construction upon them, according to his almost invariable habit. Or else he would ask her to explain wherein his silliness lay, which would be worse.

To add to her confusion, she found that she could no longer compel herself to meet the direct look of those honest eyes with their dog-like fidelity. Absurd as he was, he had actually succeeded in embarrassing her.

She turned from him and began to collect her belongings in tight-lipped silence.

He at once bent forward to assist, but he said no word of any sort, to her great astonishment.

The train was slowing down preparatory to entering

the station, and, realizing that the time for intimate talk was past, she made a bold bid to recover her dignity.

"Many thanks," she said, and just glanced at him with the words as a princess might glance at a beggar to whom she flings largesse, "—very many thanks—for all you have done for me!"

And then he spoke, very slowly and quietly, as one who weighs his words with care. "I shall try not to be silly in the future, Jeannette. Good-bye!"

That was all. Yet as he stepped aside and went back to his former place next to Sir Philip she felt that the laurels of the encounter rested with him, and wondered with puzzled discomfiture how on earth he had managed to secure them.

No further words passed between them when they left the train. Buck and Sir Philip were going straight to the City, and their leave-taking was of the briefest.

"He will probably dine with us to-night," said Lady Varleigh, as she and Jeannette drove off to the hotel.

"Shall we never see the last of him?" said Jeannette with irritation.

"My dear, how hard-hearted you are!" protested Lady Varleigh. "Don't you realize how he hates saying good-bye?"

"Then why say it?" said Jeannette.

"Dear child, how little you know of the heart-disease called love!" ejaculated Lady Varleigh dramatically.

Jeannette's delicate chin went up. "I think all men are fools when they suffer from that complaint," she said brusquely. "I've done my best to cure him anyway."

"You have indeed, darling," agreed Lady Varleigh. "And you have failed—miserably. You see—he is quite incurable."

"He is a perfect donkey!" said Jeannette.

## CHAPTER IV

### SIR JERVIS

"I REMEMBER you," said Sir Jervis Kingswold.

Jeannette looked up at him in surprise. She saw again the spare figure and thin, intellectual countenance of her recollection. But, face to face with him, she saw that which she had not previously observed—the strange, lambent fire of the eyes behind their drooping lids. She had not thought that those eyes had ever looked her way before, much less taken note of her, and his remark was wholly unexpected.

He smiled a little, and his smile in some fashion served to accentuate the habitual melancholy of his face.

"I don't claim to remember everyone I have ever met," he said. "But you are one of those whom it is not easy to forget."

"Yes, that is true," said Lady Varleigh warmly. "There has never been more than one Jeannette. I felt you would remember her, *mon ami,* if you had ever seen her."

"I am deeply honoured," said Jeannette.

"The honor will be mine," said Sir Jervis, "if you consent to come and be a friend to my young daughter who is rather badly in need of one at the present moment."

"I have come to offer my services," said Jeannette. Humble words uttered with a pride of which she was totally unconscious!

She did not resent the piercing scrutiny of those heavy eyes. In fact she rather welcomed it. However sore the humiliation at her heart, she was secure in the knowledge that no one would ever detect it by searching. No one would ever be in a position to boast that they had seen her in the dust.

"I shall be proud to accept them on my daughter's behalf," said Sir Jervis, "if we can arrive at a satisfactory business understanding. I regret that my wife is unable to be with me, but she has placed this matter entirely in my hands."

Lady Varleigh sniffed faintly. "I am sure you are fully capable of dealing with it," she said. "Shall we not get to business at once and dispose of it?"

"If Miss Wyngold is willing," said Sir Jervis.

"The sooner the better," said Jeannette.

She spoke briefly, without enthusiasm. Greatly as she had desired work, she could not muster any relish for the task now offered her. The fact that she was bound to accept it, whatever it entailed, did not add to its attractions. She realized that she could only go forward blindly and hope for the best. As Lady Varleigh had said, she need not regard it as more than a temporary arrangement.

"I am going to suggest eighty pounds a year," said Sir Jervis. "Does that meet your ideas?"

"It ought to be a hundred," said Lady Varleigh emphatically.

Jeannette turned to her. "Please, Lady Varleigh, you must forgive me for contradicting you, but it does meet my ideas. I am quite willing to accept that," she said formally to Sir Jervis. "In fact, I should not dream of accepting more."

"You are worth much more," contended Lady Varleigh.

"I have got to prove that," said Jeannette.

"We shall not quarrel over terms," said Sir Jervis quietly, and he looked at Lady Varleigh, not at Jeannette, as he spoke.

Her truculence passed. "There is only one other person in the world to whom I would trust her," she said, half-apologetically.

"I appreciate that," said Sir Jervis.

Jeannette spoke with scorn. "Pray do not imagine that I am not capable of taking care of myself!" she said. "I have done so for years."

"She always says that," said Lady Varleigh almost tearfully.

"Naturally," said Sir Jervis.

"I assure you it is absolutely true," said Jeannette, exasperated.

"I am terribly anxious," sighed Lady Varleigh.

"There is no need," said Sir Jervis.

"None whatever!" declared Jeannette.

And then very suddenly it dawned upon her that though she was the subject of their conversation she was certainly not for the moment in the fore-front of their thoughts, and her indignation vanished. On a generous impulse she got up very quietly and withdrew to the window.

The roar of traffic that rose from the busy thoroughfare below her obscured the low-toned conversation of the man and woman in the room behind, and during the few minutes that followed she knew that her presence—if not her existence—was completely forgotten. Lady Varleigh's words ran through her mind as she stood there, idly gazing downwards:—"There is always one dream that no one can forget." Was it really so with everyone, she wondered, and hardened her heart at the thought.

It would never be so with her. She was far too business-like, too prosaic, too sensible.

"I will never make a fool of myself over any man," she said to herself, and closed her lips disdainfully upon the resolution. As if any man could possibly be worth it!

She grew a little tired of waiting, but loyally refrained from turning till Lady Varleigh's voice, slightly tremulous, summoned her.

Then she moved back into the room to find her friend waiting for her with a welcoming smile.

Sir Jervis stood apart on the hearthrug, and she was again aware of his eyes watching her.

"They have come back to earth," was her thought.

"Come and sit down again, darling!" said Lady Varleigh. "We have quite finished discussing your destiny, and Sir Jervis wants to know how soon you can go to Dorothea."

"At once if you wish," said Jeannette.

He nodded. "That is just what I do wish, Miss Wyngold. My daughter is in delicate health, as I believe you have heard, and it is essential to provide her with young and wholesome companionship."

"I will do my best," said Jeannette.

"I believe you will succeed," said Sir Jervis. "I may tell you that we have been very anxious about her. This illness has affected her temperament in a fashion which sometimes renders her rather difficult, you understand, and considerable tact is necessary."

"I think I understand," said Jeannette.

"You will try to be patient with her," said Sir Jervis. "But firmness is also necessary. Unfortunately, her mother finds it somewhat difficult to exercise this."

Again Lady Varleigh sniffed, wholly unconsciously.

"If you need any authority," pursued Sir Jervis, "you

may always count upon me to support you. I know your task will not be an easy one, but it shall always be as easy as I can possibly make it."

"You are very good," said Jeannette, with the private reflection that when she could not manage a child of seventeen unaided it would be time to relinquish her task.

"Further," said Sir Jervis, "you will find that in some ways she is inclined to be secretive. I hope you will do your best to rectify this. I do not of course suggest that you should spy upon her, but I must say that I should like to feel that a certain amount of capable supervision is kept upon her."

That interested Jeannette for the first time. It appeared that she was not in danger of leading too humdrum an existence after all. Dorothea Kingswold from that moment began to possess a distinct personality for her. She even began to look forward to meeting her charge.

"I will certainly do my best," she reiterated. "And when would you like me to come?"

"Can you come really soon?" asked Sir Jervis.

"To-morrow," said Jeannette promptly.

"Splendid!" said Lady Varleigh.

"Excellent!" said Sir Jervis. "Then the matter is settled, and I assure you we shall do our very utmost to make you happy. May I say that your conduct moves me to the very deepest admiration? I know something of the world, and there are not many who would have behaved with the fine courage and self-sacrifice which you are displaying."

"She is one in a million," said Lady Varleigh. "I always knew it."

Jeannette stiffened. "Not so unique as that, I hope," she said.

"I hope not too," said Sir Jervis quietly. "But, from my knowledge of life, I think there are not many. That

is one of the reasons why I hold myself so fortunate in securing your society for my daughter. I know beforehand that she will learn nothing that is not strictly upright and honourable from you."

"Tout compritt!" said Lady Varleigh irreverently. "You have said enough to make the poor child thoroughly uncomfortable for the rest of her life! So now cease, *mon ami!* And let us go to lunch!"

She was plainly determined that there should be nothing further in the way of compliments or sentiment, and neither Sir Jervis nor Jeannette attempted to gainsay her. Jeannette was indeed thankful for the diversion, for any eulogies upon her own behaviour were to her as open condemnation of her father and almost impossible to endure.

Lady Varleigh, understanding, made luncheon an occasion for considerable frivolity, proving an elasticity of mind at which even Jeannette marvelled. Her careless lightheartedness, her inconsequence, her brilliance, carried all before them. Her gaiety was irresistible, her charm supreme. They found themselves laughing like children at a school-treat as their hostess herself described it, but the merriment emanated from her and from her alone.

When the meal was over, they sat in the lounge at her suggestion until Sir Jervis had to leave. She showed no regret when the time came for his departure, nor any desire that he should linger, somewhat to Jeannette's surprise. Sir Jervis on the other hand displayed both and took as long as possible over his adieux.

Lady Varleigh showed herself gay and vivacious to the last. There was about her that freshness and youth which in some is never wholly quenched, and it was to Jeannette as sunshine on a dark day.

But directly Sir Jervis had gone, she understood in a

flash what it had all meant to this woman who had grown old in body and not in heart. For Lady Varleigh turned upon her a face of haggard greyness and begged her in a voice that was strangely husky to take her upstairs.

She laid a groping hand upon Jeannette's arm as they moved towards the lift. "I think he didn't see," she murmured. "But I couldn't have kept it up another minute."

"You must have a rest, dear Lady Varleigh," said Jeannette.

She felt some anxiety concerning her, but Lady Varleigh's marvellous spirit soon regained the ascendant.

She permitted Jeannette to install her upon a couch, but she railed at her weakness with much vigour the while.

"It is really absurd nonsense," she said. "I suppose I over-exerted myself in the effort to send him away with a good impression. Men are such poor things, Jeannette. They never disguise their precious feelings themselves, so are quite incapable of realizing the strain we women have to endure in order to remain presentable. I think I kept up the farce, didn't I? He never suspected?"

"We neither of us did," said Jeannette, with some compunction. "I only wish I had."

"My dear!" Lady Varleigh laughed whimsically and not too steadily. "I should have been furious if you had. But I don't mind your knowing now that I've had—a hell of a time. Shall I tell you what was going on in my brain the whole time that I was playing the fool so cleverly at lunch?"

"Well, what?" said Jeannette.

"Oh, just a voice," said Lady Varleigh, and uttered a sudden, overwhelming sigh. "A thin persistent little voice—rather like conscience, only much worse than I

ever allowed mine to be—saying all the time, Jeannette, all the time—'You will never see him again,—never, never see him again.' That was what made me so jolly, dear. I had to play the fool or be one, and I chose the first."

"But then—" said Jeannette.

"No, don't argue with me, dear! These things are unarguable—a good word that! They just are. You have got that token safe on your neck, have you? Let me see it a moment, darling! Don't take it off!"

Jeannette stooped over her and slipped out the blood-red stone. It shone bright crimson in the light of the fire by which Lady Varleigh lay.

She took it into her hand and held it tremblingly for many silent seconds. Then slowly she put it to her lips. "Until the day break!" she said very softly. And in the next breath: "Take it away, dear! I've done. I believe that daughter of his is a regular little devil. I hope you'll manage to keep her in hand. Remember, if you really can't stand her, there are always two refuges open to you!"

"Two!" said Jeannette in surprise. "What are they?"

"Myself!" said Lady Varleigh dramatically, finger pointing to breast. "And—Buck!" with a wide gesture. Then with a mischievous smile: "Yes, darling, I expected you to tilt your chin at that. It is quite your most adorable pose. I am sure he thinks so, *le pauvre*. Anyway he has had ample opportunity for studying it. He isn't going to South Africa, Jeannette. I suppose you know that."

"I don't care what he does," said Jeannette, flushing.

Lady Varleigh closed her eyes. "Delicious!" she said.

## CHAPTER V

### ONE OF THE CROWD

SOMEWHAT to Jeannette's surprise, Buck did not join them at dinner that night. He was dining somewhere with young Bandy, Sir Philip said.

"Much better for him!" said Lady Varleigh. "I suppose we shall see him in the morning before we go."

But in the morning no Buck appeared, and Jeannette alone accompanied her friends to Victoria to see them depart.

"Too bad of him!" declared Lady Varleigh. "I had counted on his being here."

"But why?" said Jeannette, with thin brows upraised. "Surely we can manage without him!"

"I hate leaving you behind all alone," said Lady Varleigh. "Men are all alike—the very best of them—never there when wanted."

"I'm sure I don't want him," said Jeannette.

"Well, you will go straight to the Kingswolds', darling, when we are gone? Promise me!" urged Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette turned impulsively and kissed her. "I will do everything I ought to do," she said.

She saw them go with deliberate cheerfulness, even a moderate amount of gaiety, lest Lady Varleigh should

describe her as 'a pathetic figure' as soon as she was out of sight. But as she turned from waving her lively farewell, the awful sense of being forsaken pounced upon her like a demon, and she felt her heart grow cold within her. She was alone now, quite alone, and oh, the desolation this grey London which once had seemed to her so desirable a place!

She made her way blindly back to the barrier, aware of people all around her, but seeing no one, conscious only of the aching emptiness of her soul. A year ago her father and she had had a cosy little flat in Mayfair. There had been gaieties of all sorts, dinners, dances, theatres. Wherever she went she had been happy, successful, popular. She recalled their rides together—always together—in the Park, the consciousness of his loving pride in her, the sheer devotion which she had poured out to him in return. What a perfect companionship it had been! O God, where was he now?

Someone touched her shoulder. "Afraid I'm a bit late," said a leisurely voice. "Good morning! They've gone, have they?"

She turned swiftly, and in a moment was free from the demon's clutches. "You'd be late for anything," she said.

She meant to be scathing, but somehow from his expression she knew that she had not succeeded. He smiled at her in his ordinary, friendly way.

"Do you know I hardly dared tc speak for fear you were cutting me on purpose?" he said.

"I never trouble to be rude to people I take no interest in," countered Jeannette swiftly.

"Oh, thank you!" said Buck, sincerity in his voice. "That's about the kindest thing you have ever said to me."

She was worsted beyond hope of recovery, but she had

the generosity to laugh, and he laughed with her without malice.

"Let's go and get some coffee!" he said.

She had not the least idea why she fell in with this suggestion, for she had no desire for coffee and it would have been much simpler to have hailed a taxi and gone. But some unaccountable impulse moved her. She went with him without demur.

They sat down facing one another at a marble-topped table, and again the thought occurred to her—as it always did sooner or later—that he was the most unremarkable young man she had ever seen.

"Well? Have you sold the old Hall?" she said.

"We have put the matter in train," said Buck.

"And you think you will never regret it?" she questioned.

"I do regret it," he said simply.

She felt a touch of self-reproach, and sought to make amends. "I know how it feels," she said.

He bent towards her. "Yes, you know," he said, "—you know."

And with those two words she became aware of a bond of sympathy between them which till then she had never suspected, and which she found it impossible to ignore.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I am going to look for work."

"You will never find it," said Jeannette.

"How do you know that?" said Buck.

She was momentarily confused, for, curiously, at that moment she had no desire to hurt him. "I know how difficult it is to find for one thing," she said.

"And for another?" said Buck.

She felt as if he had challenged her, and rose at once to the occasion. "There are so many in the same plight," she said. "You are only one of the crowd."

"I have one peculiarity," protested Buck mildly.

"What is that?" she said. "Inefficiency?"

He was on the point of drinking, but set down his cup suddenly with a laugh that amazed her. "Jeannette!" he said. "Jeannette!" and seemed incapable of saying anything else.

Jeannette drank her coffee with extreme dignity. It was the result of altered circumstances, she supposed. He had never dared to laugh at her before.

Buck controlled himself with an obvious effort, but he did not apologize for his inexcusable lapse.

"Well, whatever my qualifications, I shan't starve," he said. "What did you think of Sir Jervis Kingswold?"

"It is difficult to form an opinion of anyone in a single interview," she said coldly.

"And you go there to-day?" said Buck.

"Immediately," she replied.

Buck swallowed his coffee and called for the score. Then he turned to her with complete seriousness.

"Thank you for this," he said.

She faintly smiled, more unapproachable in dignity than in resentment. They went out together into the din and bustle of the station.

"May I come with you as far as the Kingswolds'?" asked Buck.

The request surprised her, but he was already hailing a taxi; there was scant opportunity of refusing. "As you please!" she said.

She got into the cab and he followed her. "What about your luggage?" he questioned.

"I sent that round first thing this morning," she said. "But really—are you obliged to come my way?"

"Yes," said Buck.

That stirred her indignation somewhat. "I am afraid I don't quite believe you," she said.

"Never mind!" said Buck.

She turned her face to the crowded street, treating him with the contempt he deserved.

He bore it with the utmost patience and no sign of discomfiture. At the end of a quiet pause, he said, "Jeannette!" and she felt his hand close upon her own.

His action surprised her, but she checked the impulse to fling off his touch. A new factor had to be taken into consideration. She realized that anger had ceased to have much effect.

She turned her head very slowly and looked at him through her black lashes, keeping her hand absolutely still beneath his own.

"What is it?" she said.

"Nothing," said Buck steadily. "Nothing, that is, of any consequence."

His eyes met hers, and very strangely, it seemed to her that there was authority in his look. But before she could challenge it or even be sure that she had seen aright he had set her free. "I was just wondering," he said, "whether this taxi chap is going the longest way round to please himself or to please us."

"Certainly not for my gratification," said Jeannette briefly.

"Then it must be for his own," said Buck, and smiled with mild triumph at his own unusual brilliance of repartee.

Jeannette quitted the arena without more ado. He really was undeserving of further notice, and it was useless—a most lamentable waste of effort—to attempt to bring home to him the fact of his own futility. He might possibly discover it for himself, she reflected with a certain savage satisfaction, when he came actually to work in a world of men; that is, if he were fortunate enough to find work. He might be too big a fool even for that.

"Yes, but even fools have their uses," said Buck gently. "They make a restful background sometimes. Have you in your wisdom never thought of that?"

"I am afraid I could never appreciate it," said Jeannette.

"A pity!" he murmured thoughtfully.

## CHAPTER VI

### DOROTHEA

"So you are the wonderful Miss Wyngold!" said Dorothea.

She spoke from the depths of an easy-chair, and she made no movement of welcome as Jeannette advanced upon her. Her fair hair surrounded her pale face like an aureole, intensifying its pallor. Her blue eyes had a look half-insolent and half-suspicious. Jeannette saw at once that her prospective charge was by no mans prejudiced in her favour.

With characteristic firmness she took the situation in hand.

"I am Miss Wyngold, yes," she said. "You may call me Jeannette if you like, and I shall call you Dorothea."

"I don't know that I should care for that," said Dorothea.

Jeannette's thin lips looked uncompromising though they smiled. "You will get used to it," she said briskly. "Anyhow, we may as well start friends."

"We can't be friends before we know each other," said Dorothea.

"Some people find it easier before than it is after," said Jeannette.

And then her heart smote her somewhat because the child looked ill, and she knew herself to be much more than a match for her.

"Well, we won't quarrel about that," she said kindly. "I should like to call you Dorothea if I may. It is a pretty name."

"I think it's hideous," said Dorothea. She added, with belated hospitality, "Can't you find a chair and sit down?"

Jeannette did so. Somehow the oddness of the experience robbed it of its unpleasantness. This spoilt girl of seventeen had not the power to hurt her. In fact, it rather amused her to let her try.

"Have you seen Mother?" demanded Dorothea.

"Not yet," said Jeannette.

"How you will hate each other!" was Dorothea's comment.

Jeannette became a little impatient. "I hope I shall get on with you all," she said. "It is my intention to do so."

"You won't succeed," said Dorothea.

"Why not?" said Jeannette.

"Nobody ever gets on with anybody in this house." The girl spoke restlessly, discontentedly. "Everyone goes their separate ways, and is angry when anyone else chances to cross them. One thing is quite certain. If you please Father, you won't please Mother, and *vice versa.*"

"Well, I haven't come to look after either of them, have I?" said Jeannette.

"I know that," said Dorothea. "But you don't suppose you're here for my pleasure, do you? Oh, dear, no! You're here simply to spy on me and see that I do all the things that I hate doing. That's why Nurse wasn't kept. They said she was too lenient."

She spoke with a bitterness that testified very amply

to the deep-seated rebellion within her. It was not a prepossessing attitude, yet Jeannette was touched.

"But there must be things you like doing as well," she said.

"I mayn't do them," said Dorothea. She added with a sudden smile, "And you'd better not be too nice to me either, because if I get to like you, they'll send you away."

"My dear child," said Jeannette, "I simply don't believe that."

"That's because you don't know," said Dorothea.

Jeannette laughed a little. "Well tell me some of the things you have to do!"

Dorothea made a face. "They're beastly, all of them. I have to begin with a cold salt bath every morning for one thing. That's for my spine. And I have to stay in it too. It isn't just a sponge and out again like the boys. Then when I'm perished with cold I have to come out and do exercises—till I'm ready to drop. That's for my spine too. After that, I have to do two hours on a back-board. Then I have French lessons. Then I go for a walk. Then after lunch the back-board again till three, when I go to a swimming-bath and have to do breast-stroke the whole time. And I come back from that like I am now, just about finished. It's a cheery life," said Dorothea, with growing bitterness. "In the evenings I am supposed to study, and if I can't—or won't—do that, it's more back-board till bedtime. You're engaged to see that I don't miss a single beastly item. It'll be your job, and if you do it, I shall hate you—and of course you'll hate me." Her voice dropped upon a note of weariness.

"Look here!" said Jeannette briskly. "If all this is going to do you any good, it's worth it. I suppose they want you to get strong so that in a year or two you can be presented and have some fun."

Dorothea's eyes brightened at the thought, but very swiftly the brightness died. "I shall never have any fun," she said. "Betty will have all the fun. She's at school now, but she'll be out as soon as I am. Mother likes her best, so of course I shan't count."

"Oh, that's ridiculous!" Jeannette said with decision. "You are sure to get your turn—if your health is good enough. The great thing is to do all we possibly can to make it so. We must try and think out some plan to make things easier. Perhaps we can alter the time-table a little. And then as to study, we might read together. It would make it more interesting."

"Oh, I don't want you as a governess too, thanks," said Dorothea, with disgust.

Jeannette laughed. "Heaven forbid!" she said. "I shall have enough to do without that, I can clearly see. But I promise you this. If you're sensible and do your best, I'll help you to the very last inch. But if you're not—well, I shall do my job all the same, but you won't enjoy it,—neither shall I."

Dorothea regarded her with a species of sulky curiosity. "Do you think you could make me do things?" she said.

"I am quite sure of it," said Jeannette.

"You don't look awfully strong," commented Dorothea.

Jeannette's hawk-like eyes came to hers with an almost transfixing suddenness. "I am strong enough to manage you, my dear," she said, with quiet conviction, "even if it comes to putting you to bed with a slapping."

"I'm not a child," said Dorothea.

"Oh yes, you are. And a very spoilt one." With complete amiability Jeannette put her right. "You don't like discipline. None of us do, I suppose. But you'll have to put up with it—as everyone does sooner or later.

And the less fuss the better. You're lucky to begin early."

Dorothea looked at her with increasing curiosity and lessening sulkiness. "Have you ever had any discipline?" she asked.

"Yes," said Jeannette.

"When?" asked Dorothea.

"Now," said Jeannette.

"Oh!" said Dorothea. There was something in the elder girl's tone which very distinctly forbade any further question on that point. She turned from it almost nervously. "Well, I don't see you slapping me and putting me to bed," she said, with a downward-curving smile.

"You wait!" said Jeannette, still serene in her good-humour. "I should think three good smacks every night for a week might work wonders. But we will try other remedies first."

"I wonder whether I'm going to like you," said Dorothea, after a slightly uncertain pause.

"I shouldn't worry about that," returned Jeannette, "because it really doesn't matter in the least whether you do or not. You've got to put up with me—just as I have got to put up with you. But you may be quite sure of one thing. I shall never punish you unless you deserve it."

"Punish me!" exclaimed Dorothea, turning crimson. "Are you—are you in earnest?"

"Oh, quite!" said Jeannette. "Why?"

"Because if—if—if—" Dorothea stammered with amazement, anger, and a most unaccustomed sensation for which she had no name—"if you did, I'd—I'd——"

"Yes?" said Jeannette. "You would complain to your mother perhaps—or your father?"

She spoke quite gently, but there was just a hint of

something that was rather cold and hard beneath her gentleness. It was the steel of her own endurance.

"They wouldn't care! They never take my part!" gasped Dorothea, and suddenly surprise and anger gave way before that third, more powerful force; fear gaped at Jeannette out of childish piteous eyes. "You've got to be good to me! You must be good to me!" sobbed Dorothea.

An impulse to rise and comfort caught Jeannette; it almost swept her from her chair. But she resisted it. She put it firmly and very definitely away.

"My dear child," she said, in level, reasonable tones, "I have never had the faintest intention of being anything else, so dry your eyes and don't be silly! You've nothing at all to cry about."

Her manner was as a cold *douche* to the startled Dorothea. Instinctively she grabbed at her self-control, and with difficulty re-established it.

Something else was also established in that moment, and both girls realized it, but with very varying emotions. Jeannette's ascendancy over her charge arose impregnably from a rock-like foundation of respect that was not unmingled with awe. Jeannette recognized it with the placid reflection that in some cases personality was far more potent and of greater value than wealth. She knew that from that hour the difficulties that awaited her in her new post were so greatly reduced as to be almost negligible. She had not the faintest doubt of her ability to do with Dorothea exactly as she would.

Dorothea's attitude was of a very different character. With the realization of a force against which her own puny strength had spent itself in vain, came a very curious feeling of satisfaction. She admired Jeannette and it was in some fashion a relief to feel that her spoilt moods would never be tolerated. She might rebel again, be

beaten again; but she understood quite fully that any punishment she received would be inflicted by the hand of justice alone. No personal resentment would ever actuate Jeannette. In her cold pride she would never stoop to be offended by the vagaries of a child like Dorothea. Without doubt she would master her, and with well-balanced judicialism she would maintain her mastery. But she would never descend to the petty retaliations to which Dorothea had been accustomed. What she did would be done broadly, and wholly without prejudice. And Dorothea was deeply stirred by the conviction. She no longer desired to pit her strength against that of Jeannette. She wanted rather to feel the support of the power she had defied. A longing was born within her somehow to win Jeannette's love.

After a considerable pause she voiced it, dubiously. "I wonder—if you'll ever like me," she said.

It was uttered with a humility so completely at variance with her former air of self-assurance that Jeannette was touched. The moment for kindness had arrived, and she proceeded to dispense it with a semi-regal condescension.

"I have no doubt I shall like you very much, my dear," she said, "if you take the trouble to make me do so."

She patted Dorothea's hand, and was slightly surprised when the younger girl carried her own impulsively to her lips.

"I like you—awfully," said Dorothea. "I think you are wonderful."

It was impossible not to be slightly gratified though Jeannette scorned herself for so being.

"We shall get to know each other better by degrees," she said, and withdrew her hand with a smile.

It had been an easy victory, and it had done her good. Perhaps life was not so full of difficulties, after all, as she had imagined. Remembering Lady Varleigh's sin-

ister forebodings, she decided to proceed with caution; but she could not resist telling herself with no little emphasis that it was only the fools who ever really went right under, and—with a certain viciousness unworthy of her high standard of aloof dignity—no one ever missed them when they did.

## CHAPTER VII

### LADY KINGSWOLD

JEANNETTE did not see Lady Kingswold for two days after her arrival at the great house in Haddington Square, a fact which Dorothea assured her was by no means remarkable.

"She is sure not to like you because Father engaged you," was her charge's explanation, and its simplicity seemed to Jeannette to make it highly probable.

It was not vastly flattering to have her presence entirely ignored, but philosophically she reflected that such treatment was infinitely preferable to interference, and it gave her an opportunity to find her feet in her new surroundings.

Dorothea was disposed to be far more tractable than first acquaintance had led her to suppose, and she was quickly aware that the complete change of atmosphere was very beneficial to herself. The terrible sense of tragedy which had so oppressed her was somewhat lifted; the disaster that had swallowed up her previous existence began to recede. It was characteristic of her to take a keen interest in everything to which she set her hand, and this habit very speedily asserted itself. Her vitality was reviving.

Among her accomplishments she numbered that of

being a fairly gifted pianist, and she very soon discovered that Dorothea was ardently fond of music though her own studies had had to be abandoned.

"I'm never allowed to do anything I like," she told Jeannette.

But the piano remained in the old schoolroom in which now most of the girl's waking hours were spent; and Jeannette found that she could lighten much of her tedium by its means.

She was playing to her on the second evening after her arrival while Dorothea lay on the detested back-board when there came a quiet knock and Sir Jervis looked round the door.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Dorothea, and Jeannette ceased to play.

He came forward with a word of greeting and stood before the fire. "Don't let me interrupt the concert!" he said.

Jeannette, glancing at him, noted a look of weariness on his face that sent a quick twinge of pain to her heart. It reminded her of the hopeless expression that her father had been wont to wear.

He saw her glance and answered it. "I have had a hard day at the Courts," he said. "It's a relief to be back. Go on playing, won't you?"

"Will you have some tea?" asked Jeannette practically.

He shook his head. "No, no! I don't take it. Let me have some more of that music, Miss Wyngold! You have a charming touch."

Jeannette turned back to the piano and resumed her playing. As she did so, he drew up a chair and sat down by his young daughter's side. She heard them talking a little from time to time as she played, but they were obviously not on very intimate terms, and they soon dropped into complete silence.

The door had remained half-open after Sir Jervis's entrance, and Jeannette who faced it on the music-stool, presently saw it open a little further, gradually, almost furtively.

The passage outside was dim, but her eyes were very keen, and she fixed them on the aperture while yet continuing the Hungarian dance into which her fingers had wandered.

What she saw surprised her though she gave no sign. A woman's face came into view, a drawn, white face with an almost wolfish look about the eyes—a starved and craving look that was scarcely human.

Jeannette played on, keeping her own eyes deliberately fixed upon the figure half-revealed in the doorway. She realized at once that the furtive manner of entering was not on her account, and the eyes that searched the room were not looking for her.

They came to her eventually as the door swung further open, and the moment they did so Jeannette very quietly brought her melody to a close.

"Oh, don't stop!" exclaimed Dorothea, and then in a very different tone—a tone in which undeniably distaste was uppermost—"Oh, it's Mother!"

Lady Kingswold came into the room, a colourless woman of average height who once had been one of fashion's beauties.

"So you are here!" she commented fretfully to her husband ere she turned to Jeannette.

He rose at once at her coming. "I believe you and Miss Wyngold have met before," he said.

"I have no recollection of it," said Lady Kingswold.

"Nor I," said Jeannette very swiftly.

Lady Kingswold gave her a look of surprise which betrayed the character of her own statement as completely as it challenged that of Jeannette.

"Now I think of it," she said, "I believe we did meet once—in your more fortunate days."

"I am afraid I do not remember it," said Jeannette, with her hard bright smile. "I must apologize for my forgetfulness."

"You have had to forget a good deal since then, have you not?" said Lady Kingswold.

"I think my memory is fairly accurate on the whole," said Jeannette, "at least in matters that count."

A sudden snigger from the back-board caused Lady Kingswold to turn somewhat sharply though perhaps the interruption was not wholly unwelcome.

"I thought this was your hour for study, Dorothea," she remarked coldly. "It is curious how seldom you manage to be equal to doing things for which you have no inclination.

"It would be more curious if I were ever allowed to do anything I liked," returned Dorothea, hunching herself into a sudden heap.

"Girls of your age cannot expect to be amused like children," said her mother.

"I can't remember ever being amused in my life," said Dorothea.

"You always were ungrateful and insolent," said Lady Kingswold. She turned upon her husband standing silently by. "Are you coming downstairs, Jervis?"

"I have only just come up," he said.

She threw a glance around. "Well, there is nothing to keep you, is there? If it is Dorothea you wish to see, she had better come down too and sit in the drawing-room."

"No, thanks," said Dorothea.

Her mother passed her over. "Well, I can hardly imagine you can wish to sit up here," she said, still ad-

dressing her husband. "Miss Wyngold is not a guest, remember. She does not expect to be entertained."

"I rather think she was doing the entertaining," said Sir Jervis, with the shadow of a smile. He turned to Jeannette. "Thank you for your music. I hope you will give me the pleasure of hearing you again some day. You have the touch that soothes."

He smiled suddenly and unexpectedly straight into her eyes, and a strange feeling of warmth went through her, sweeping all thought of resentment from her mind.

She uttered conventional thanks, and he turned away, went to the door and held it ceremoniously for his wife to pass out.

Then, when she had done so, he paused an instant, and again his eyes sought Jeannette.

"Good night!" he said. "Good night, Dorothea!"

"Good night," said Jeannette.

"Great Scott!" said Dorothea, and chuckled sardonically as the door closed. "There'll be a holy row over this. But can you imagine any man being such an idiot as to give in to her?"

"I think you had better read French for half-an-hour now," said Jeannette.

"Oh, dash it all!" protested Dorothea. "But why? Just because my mother is in a tantrum with my father?"

"No, my dear; simply because I think it would be good for you," said Jeannette.

"You can be a cat, can't you?" said Dorothea. "I was really rather sorry for her myself. She had so very much the worst of it."

Jeannette took a book of French plays from a shelf and gave it to her.

"I'm not going to do it lying here," said Dorothea.

"Yes, you are," said Jeannette with decision. "If you don't feel you can do that, you must go to bed."

Dorothea's blue eyes flashed rebellion. "I won't do either," she said, and sat up on the back-board. "I'll go down to the drawingroom—as my mother suggested."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said Jeannette.

She spoke quickly, but without the faintest trace of agitation. Her pale face with its thin lips looked severe, but it held no anger.

"Do you think you can prevent me?" said Dorothea, beginning to breathe hard.

"Yes, I think so," said Jeannette.

Dorothea got to her feet. "I defy you to try!" she said, and tossed the book with violence upon the table.

Jeannette's eyes grew suddenly intensely bright—as the eyes of a hawk that spies a likely prey. "My dear child!" she said contemptuously.

Dorothea stared at her as if fascinated. "Well?" she said, after a moment.

"That's all," said Jeannette. "Now don't be silly! Just lie down again! Here's the book!"

She spoke briskly, and, picking up the book, once more handed it to Dorothea, after which she turned quietly aside to close the piano with the air of anticipating no further trouble.

And Dorothea was conquered. For some reason rebellion became futile and unreasonable; yet was there no humiliation in her defeat. It had indeed scarcely been a battle. But her respect for Jeannette from that moment became almost an obsession. She bowed to her ruling without further question. And thus Jeannette entered upon a new kingdom in which her government, if restricted, was no whit less absolute than before.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TWO TRAMPS

NEITHER Sir Jervis nor Lady Kingswold invaded the schoolroom for several days, and Jeannette found herself slipping into a routine with her charge which might have been of several years' standing.

They were just entering upon December and the weather was cold and dreary. Their daily walks in the Park held very little attraction for either of them, and the old weariness and sorrow which had been temporarily alleviated by change of circumstances came back upon Jeannette, sometimes overwhelmingly, strive against them as she might. She bore it all in silence, and Dorothea never guessed at the misery locked away behind those curiously veiled eyes whose keenness held such an alarming fascination for her. But there were hours of persistent wakefulness in the night when the strain was almost intolerable to Jeannette. She had thought that work would bring relief, but it only seemed to add to her burden. She missed the love that had ever surrounded her, and was sick with the longing to hear her father's voice—a longing which even in her dreams was never satisfied.

She still maintained her authority over Dorothea, but it was almost inevitable that her vigilance should relax somewhat, and Dorothea was not slow to take advantage

of it. She never defied Jeannette, but she developed what was almost a system of petty deceits by which she evaded much of the discipline which she so abhorred.

Jeannette detected her very speedily, as was also inevitable, and this, unfortunately for Dorothea, after a night of complete sleeplessness. Her retribution was swift and sharp. It was a Sunday morning, and she found her charge luxuriating in a hot bath instead of carrying out the usual programme of tepid tub and vigorous exercises. She had suspected her of this form of shirking two days before, but close questioning had elicited only the most positive and indignant assurances of innocence. But this time she was fairly caught, and Jeannette was in no lenient mood.

She ordered Dorothea out of the bath and pronounced brief and uncompromising sentence upon her as she reluctantly and shamefacedly emerged. "You behave like a child, and you shall be treated as such," she said. "You will go straight back to bed and stay there for the rest of the day."

Dorothea, red-hot with mortification, made indignant outcry. They had been going to a concert that afternoon—a most unusual treat of Sir Jervis's devising, and the prospect of that deprivation in connection with Jeannette's summary treatment moved her to a state of noisy and tearful remonstrance. She did not dare to resist Jeannette even then, for the justice of the punishment was as unassailable as the authority that backed it, and the fact that Jeannette had the courage to punish her was one which, offensive as it might be, carried considerable weight. But her protests were loud if unavailing, and by the time Jeannette, severely unyielding, had marshalled her back to bed she was on the verge of screaming hysterics which must have been audible to the entire household. Jeannette's treatment continued to

be prompt and effectual though sublimely free from any hint of agitation. She checked the hysterics with the application of a sponge filled with ice-cold water—a remedy which almost immediately reduced Dorothea to a mere sobbing pulp, and then very firmly she quitted the room, turning the key on the outside, and left her charge to recover in solitude.

In the passage she encountered Sir Jervis.

He looked at her curiously. "Do you want any help?" he said.

"None, thanks," said Jeannette briefly.

Nevertheless, as she walked into the schoolroom she realized that her knees were not very steady and sat down on the nearest chair.

"Little fiend!" she said, permitting herself some vent to her feelings now that the emergency was past. "I very nearly slapped her."

"A pity you didn't!" said Sir Jervis.

Jeannette laughed mirthlessly, with lips that trembled. "It's good of you to take my part," she said.

"You see, I chance to know my daughter rather well," he returned dryly. "Has she been giving much trouble?"

"None till to-day," said Jeannette. "And this was my own fault. I ought to have kept a sharper look-out. I will for the future."

"Don't overdo it!" said Sir Jervis. "You're not looking too well. This sort of thing is something of a strain."

"Oh, that is absurd," said Jeannette. "If I can't manage a chit of that age I had better apply for a housemaid's place at once!"

She spoke sharply, for her annoyance was still very near the surface.

But Sir Jervis replied with gravity. "My dear Miss Wyngold, I know quite well that this kind of post en-

tails very considerable wear and tear. That was partly why I suggested that concert for this afternoon."

"Well, I can't go anyway," said Jeannette, with a touch of snappiness. "I am going to keep Dorothea in bed all day."

He looked at her with a hint of humour. "I admire your fine spirit of discipline," he said. "But I don't see why you should be punished too. Why shouldn't you go without her?"

"I couldn't trust her," said Jeannette.

"She couldn't do much," he argued. "And she would feel it far more if you went without her."

It was a distinct temptation. She looked at him with the first sign of wavering, and as their eyes met the same thought occurred to both, and they laughed.

"You're tempting me from my duty!" she said.

"I consider I am the one person who has the right to do so," said Sir Jervis. "You will enjoy that concert, and—if you will allow me to escort you—so shall I."

"Oh!" said Jeannette abruptly. "You are thinking of coming too!"

"It would't be much fun for you alone," he pointed out.

This was undeniable. Jeannette was very tired of solitude just then. She sat considering.

"Of course," said Sir Jervis politely, "if you would enjoy it more alone, I will not intrude upon you."

She sent him a quick half-quizzing glance. "I wasn't considering that," she said. "Of course I shouldn't enjoy it more alone. But I am not at all sure that you would enjoy it."

"Why do you say that?" he said.

Against her will her colour rose. "It will be more or less public," she said. "People will recognize us. They will be a little surprised that you should care to be seen

with—with—" she halted at the reproach which till then she had never uttered—"my father's daughter."

"Do you think it matters to me in the least what people say?" he said.

"It ought to," said Jeannette. "You are in a sense dependent upon public opinion, are you not?"

"Not in the least," he said forcibly.

She looked at him with steady intention. "I am not sure," she said, "that you may not already have done some damage to yourself in engaging me as a companion for your daughter. You did it, I know, to oblige Lady Varleigh, who is very hard to refuse, but——"

"Believe me," he broke in with an emphasis that surprised her, "my friendship for Lady Varleigh had very little to do with it. My admiration for you was my main motive. I consider you one of the finest women I have ever met."

She kept her eyes upraised to his. "That of course is absurd," she said. "I do not see that I have done anything in the least extraordinary."

"That is because your standard is extraordinarily high," said Sir Jervis. "I assure you that if you will accept my escort this afternoon, I shall be very proud."

"I think it is you who are extraordinary," said Jeannette.

He smiled a little. "In being able to appreciate nobility when I meet it? Do you know there is only one other woman of my acquaintance who would, I believe, be capable of such a sacrifice as you have made?"

"You are talking of Lady Varleigh," said Jeannette.

He bent his head, and his smile passed. "She is magnificent, and you are like her. She is a woman whose charm will never be forgotten by those who know her. And she is capable of much more than charm."

"I know," said Jeannette with simplicity

He walked to the mantelpiece and leaned his arm upon it, gazing down into the fire as though he sought some picture there. "I think she has the gift of eternal youth," he said. "There is that in her which will never grow old. The rest of us get jaded and tarnished, but she never. Her body has always been in subjection to her spirit. She holds her own against everything physical —circumstance, time, mortality. A marvellous woman— not of the earth—a goddess!"

He seemed to have forgotten Jeannette, and she sat at the table, watching, listening, wondering if she ought to recall to him the fact of her presence.

He went on speaking without changing his position. "She was born too soon. Had she been in her prime now, what a mark she would have made! A wonder-woman, far above the crowd, her foot upon their necks, —invincible!"

"That is my name for her," said Jeannette.

He stirred at the sound of her voice, and she realized that she was not forgotten though he did not turn.

"Yes, you know her," he said. "You have the same brave spirit, the same unquenchable fire. She thinks the world of you, and so do I. There is something kindred about you. You are so like her in soul that I can't look on you as a stranger. You have that spark of the Divine which lifts you above the rest. If she had ever had a daughter, it could only have been you."

Somehow that touched Jeannette very deeply; the pathos of the faded vision which yet was unforgotten.

"Life is very hard to some of us," she said. "But I think it has been unusually hard to you."

He straightened his shoulders. "I am not squirming," he said. "I have had my share of good things,—more than my share, very possibly. But there is always an empty place beside you unless the one trusted comrade

is there. Don't forget that if ever you have to choose! There is no other thing on God's earth that can fill that empty place."

"Ah!" said Jeannette, and stifled a sudden pang at her heart.

Did he realize how desperately empty and forlorn she felt? All night she had wandered through desolation.

He turned quietly round to her. His eyes with their amazing fire beneath their drooping lids comprehended her—and understood.

"We are two tramps on a lonely road," he said. "Is there any reason why we shouldn't help each other along now and then?"

"I doubt if we can," said Jeannette.

His heavy lids lifted a little. "Really? But why?"

She answered him prophetically. "I think it is very doubtful if we find ourselves on the same road for long."

"I wonder what makes you say that?" he said.

She smiled faintly and shook her head. But the thought in her mind to which she would not give expression was of a woman, pale-faced, antagonistic, peering into the very room in which they were now talking with an insatiable craving in her eyes.

## CHAPTER IX

### OTTO PAUL

JEANNETTE enjoyed the concert that afternoon, partly for its own sake, partly because the man beside her enjoyed it in exactly the same way. Neither of them possessed ultra-classical tastes, but the music to which they listened held the same appeal for both. It was sheer rest to Jeannette after the misery and weariness through which she had passed. The awful sense of being forsaken drew away from her again into the background, so that for a space she was able to forget it. It had oppressed her painfully of late. She missed Lady Varleigh more than she had deemed possible, and—there was no denying it—she missed Buck. She felt that Buck had failed her at last, for she had seen and heard nothing of him since the day she had first entered the Kingswolds' house. She regarded his behaviour as little short of outrageous since he had expressed a definite intention of seeking her out, but in spite of this—or perhaps because of it—she found it impossible to dismiss him from her thoughts. It was not that she wanted him, it was only the feeling that in the unlikely event of her doing so, he would not be there, which disturbed her,—the fact that after all, notwithstanding his protestations, he was no different from the rest. He had disappointed her

bitterly and it would be hard to forgive him, if indeed he ever sought forgiveness. Perhaps he had just dropped out of her life like all the others, and she would never see him again. But, though she often said this to herself, she never quite brought herself to regard it as a very serious contingency. Buck had always been there, and it was unthinkable that he should finally have deserted his post, at least without an emphatic dismissal from her, and hardly then. She had despised him for his faithfulness, but now that it seemed to be withdrawn she missed it with a keenness that was near akin to a heartache. Fool and idiot—to desert her just at this critical time when he might have been her sole support! How characteristic of him to withdraw from the field just when she had actually begun to lean upon him! If he had ever really hoped to win her, what a lunatic thus to destroy the only chance he had ever had of doing so! There was a feeling of tears somewhere behind Jeannette's eyes whenever the thought of Buck crossed her mind—angry tears, forlorn tears, piteous tears; and even though Sir Jervis's presence and sympathetic companionship helped her to forget her loneliness, even though she enjoyed the concert as possibly she had never enjoyed a concert before, the feeling of something lost never wholly left her. If only Buck had kept his word and maintained his vigil! How vastly comforting it would have been to have known that this last and least of her vassals had not forsaken her!

It was growing late and quite dark when they emerged from the concert-hall. They had stayed till the end, and a considerable crowd was around them. Descending the steps, Jeannette found herself actually touching a woman she knew, with whom in the old days she had been on terms of friendship. She knew that she was unseen and made no attempt to bring herself into notice, but as they

reached the pavement simultaneously a sudden surge of people drove them against each other and recognition was inevitable. The old acquaintance turned to Jeannette with a smile of apology which flashed for a second into a smile of greeting and faded as swiftly into a stony, impersonal stare.

Jeannette's eyes, with their bird-like keenness, looked imperially back. They held not the faintest gleam of recognition, merely a detached and slightly disdainful interest in the crowd. As Sir Jervis piloted her through the throng, she laughed.

"You have enjoyed it?" he asked.

"Very much," she answered. "Did you see the Hon. Mrs. Ralph Cornish just now? I am afraid you will have something to live down after this."

"She was never a very dear friend of mine," said Sir Jervis. "I believe my wife likes her, however."

"Another nail in my coffin!" observed Jeannette.

"What do you mean?" He spoke almost sharply.

But she would not answer him. "We won't discuss her," she said. "It's a waste of time. It was a delightful concert, and I shall never forget it."

"You really have enjoyed it?" he said.

"Very much," said Jeannette again. "Thank you—thank you immensely."

She spoke with a warmth that came from her heart, and Sir Jervis was touched. Pity and admiration had given him a keener insight where she was concerned than he could have acquired in years of casual friendship. And her connection with Lady Varleigh supplied a magic which strongly stirred his imagination.

"Don't thank me!" he said. "We are comrades. Will you come with me again one day?"

"If it can be done without giving offence," said Jeannette.

He smiled at that. "Dorothea can't expect to have you all day long and always."

Jeannette's reply had not applied to Dorothea, but she did not explain that. Sir Jervis was a man, who more than any other, must know exactly what the outcome of such a situation might be. He had chosen to be friendly to her, and she valued his friendliness, seeing in it precisely what he intended to convey—sympathy, understanding, appreciation. She also suspected that he might have given some sort of pledge to show her kindness in response to Lady Varleigh's importunities, but that the fulfilment of it, if such a pledge existed, gave him unmixed pleasure was evident, and she did not feel called upon to refuse to benefit by it. Her life was too empty for that.

"You will come into the drawingroom and have some tea," said Sir Jervis, as he unlocked the front door.

"I think I ought to go up to Dorothea," she said.

He regarded her with a certain compression of the features that made him look severe. It was a look with which his legal opponents at the Bar were unpleasantly familiar.

"You need have no fear for Dorothea's comfort," he said. "She can be thoroughly trusted to attend to that without any assistance."

As Jeannette had arranged before leaving for Dorothea's tea to be taken up to her at the usual hour there certainly seemed no great cause for anxiety on the delinquent's behalf; but yet she hesitated.

"There may be guests," she said.

"There is no guest under my roof who would not be honoured by meeting you," said Sir Jervis.

She laughed a little. "They may not agree with you in that point."

"Why not?" he said abruptly.

She had a sudden feeling as of a trap set. She evaded it without an instant's delay. "My status in society has altered," she said.

His face changed. The compressed look went out of it. "Society is the poorer for that," he said quietly. "Will you oblige me, Miss Wyngold, by regarding yourself henceforth as an honoured guest in my house?"

His tone gave her no choice. She could not pursue the point. "Thank you," she said and obeyed his motion to precede him to the drawingroom.

The sound of voices reached her ere she opened the door, but she hesitated no more. Her head was high as she walked in with Sir Jervis behind her. She entered, as she would have entered in the old days, with absolute self-possession.

There were several people in the room, but the buzz of conversation died down at her appearance. Everyone looked up to see the new-comer.

Sir Jervis spoke with a suavity she had never heard from him before that was irresistibly suggestive of the Law Courts. "We are not too late for tea, I see. Come and sit down, Miss Wyngold! I will get you a cup."

He motioned her to a chair before he turned to greet his wife's guests, a chair that was vacated upon her entrance by a man at whom in the momentary confusion she barely glanced. She realized that there were one or two people present whom she knew, but her experience outside the concert-hall had put her on her guard. She would acknowledge no acquaintance with anyone who did not accost her first.

She sat very upright in her chair, watching the scene, scarcely aware of the man whose chair she had taken, who now stood motionless beside her but slightly in the background.

Lady Kingswold was smiling in a pinched way behind

the tea-table while she talked to a man of vast girth with a soft, flabby face and an oily voice. Jeannette knew this man by sight and name, a Polish Jew by birth, an English knight by aspiration though not yet in actual fact. She had never spoken to Mr. Otto Paul, had indeed somewhat gone out of her way to avoid him. He was reputed to be immensely rich, was the owner of several London theatres and—a factor which certainly seemed to point to a certain type of genius—he made them pay. It was money alone that had given him the *entrée* to society, and Jeannette, though conscious that the same might be said of herself, had always shrunk from forming any connection with the set to which he obviously belonged.

She watched him now with a fastidious shudder behind her calm exterior. How could any woman endure the close proximity of such a man? His soft, fat laugh reached her where she sat, and once swiftly, craftily it seemed to her, his small eyes leaped past his hostess and took her in. She resented the look for a reason which she would have been utterly at a loss to explain.

Someone else resented it also apparently, or was it mere chance that the hand of the man who stood beside though slightly behind her should catch her eye at the moment as it stirred and slowly clenched?

She turned in her chair and looked at him fully for the first time. Amazement gripped her by the throat, and she gasped.

"You!" she said.

He smiled down at her, friendly, reassuring. "I was wondering how long it would take you to recognize me."

Jeannette withdrew her gaze. She was crimson with surprise and a queer feeling of relief the intensity of which filled her with annoyance.

"Idiot!" she whispered to herself. "Blundering idiot! I might have known he would turn up at the most inconvenient moment. He always does."

"Yes, I know," said Buck, gently, even sympathetically. "But, you see I've found a job and Sunday is my only free day."

She recovered herself sufficiently to laugh albeit with a certain grimness. That Buck of all people should possess the power to move her so was a practically unforgivable offence, but he was so thickheaded by nature that it was more than likely he had not observed it. This consideration helped her to regain her composure.

"You are very lucky to have found work so soon," she remarked, in the detached tone of one to whom the subject was of no importance whatever.

"Very lucky," agreed Buck.

He seemed to accept her lack of interest as inevitable and volunteered nothing more, a species of humility which annoyed her still further. After all, what right had he to take anything for granted so far as she was concerned? Yet, in a distinctly negative fashion, she was glad to find that he had not deserted his post. He was the only link with the dear old world of her youth left to her now, her only relic of sovereignty.

He brought her tea and continued to stand beside her, just as of old, while she drank it. At Lady Kingswold's persuasion, someone went to the piano, and soon the strains of Mendelssohn's exquisite Spring Song floated through the room. It was ridiculous of course, it was sentiment carried to excess, but she became conscious again of an almost anguished feeling of tears. They welled up from the very heart of her till their suppression became a definite struggle for self-control.

Suddenly Buck leaned down to her and in his tactless way began to talk under cover of the music.

"How are you getting on here? Do they treat you decently?"

She gulped down her tea and her rising tears with it. "Of course! What did you expect?"

"I don't know," he said with pleasant vagueness. "And have you heard from Lady Varleigh lately?"

Why could he not leave her alone? She was sure that Sir Jervis would never have pestered her with questions at such a moment. Those haunting strains were drawing her, and she wanted to give herself up to them, to withdraw into her misery. Buck's presence became an encumbrance, an intrusion unwarrantable, scarcely bearable. And yet, though she could have risen and left him, she did not. She bore with his inanities—with obvious impatience, it is true, yet she bore with them.

"Oh yes, I have heard from Lady Varleigh. She writes every week."

"How is she getting on?" said Buck.

She frowned. "Oh, quite well, I think.

"I am glad of that," said Buck. He was silent a moment, still bending over her; then, still under cover of the music, he spoke again. "I want to see you again, Jeannette. Will you meet me somewhere?"

The boldness of the suggestion astounded her. All inclination to tears departed in a second. Her eyes, as they came to his, were extremely bright. "Do you wish to see me for any special reason?" she said.

"Yes," said Buck.

Just the single word spoken with absolute simplicity, his attitude one of unfailing patience!

"I don't know if I can manage it," said Jeannette.

"Won't you try?" he said.

It seemed unreasonable to refuse, but she was not disposed to concede the point very readily. Moreover, her hours of leisure were practically nil. She reflected that

she could probably get away one evening after tea when Dorothea was studying, if she really desired to do so. But that did not justify him in making the request. Would she be granting too much if she acceded to it?

Perhaps he saw that she was on the point of refusal, for he suddenly abandoned his attitude of the waiting suppliant and spoke with quiet decision.

"You can't say anything definite now. I quite understand, and it doesn't matter in the least. I shall wait at the corner of the square by the church from five-thirty to six-thirty every evening until you come."

He straightened himself with the words as though there were no more to be said, and before she could speak in answer he had taken her empty cup and moved across to the tea-table with it.

The music came to an end, and all chance of further conversation was gone. Jeannette found Lady Kingswold's eyes very significantly upon her, and awoke to a somewhat belated sense of duty.

She rose to go, not altogether dissatisfied with this counter-move which would deprive Buck at least of the pleasure of harbouring any idea of having worsted her. But as she turned to the door a new and unpleasant development checked her progress.

Otto Paul sprang from his chair with the amazing agility sometimes displayed by the very stout and intercepted her.

"It is Miss Jeannette Wyngold, is it not?" he said, speaking with a foreign burr which seemed to add to the oily softness of his voice. "I was sure of it. You have such an arresting face." He rolled his "r's" all round his tongue in the throaty, Continental fashion. "And you are left alone—and working for your living? That is hard. That is very hard."

His hand was extended. His small eyes seemed to

spill their unctuous, unwelcome sympathy over her. She looked at him in frozen surprise.

"I do not remember that we have met before," she said.

He laughed at her, not offensively, only with amused triumph. "No, no! You would not remember. But I, on the other hand, never forget. And you have found a post here, I am told?"

"For a time," said Jeannette.

She wanted to avoid that fat, unmuscular hand, but somehow it found and fastened upon her own.

"Ah!" said Paul, beaming upon her. "For a time, you say! For a time! Very good! When that time is up, come to me, Miss Wyngold, and I will make you a business proposition which you will find very attractive, very. The Caravan Theatre will always find me, and I shall be charmed to see you at any time. You must go now? Then I will say—*au revoir!*"

He released her hand and opened the door for her. She had a feeling, though she did not turn, that Buck was standing behind her, and she half expected him to follow her out, but he did not do so.

She found herself alone in the corridor and shuddering as if she had been made to drink some nauseating draught.

"Horrible man!" she murmured to herself.

Her resources would need to be at the very last ebb before she would turn for help to such a man as that. Yet even as she began to mount the stairs a chill misgiving went through her as she realized how very low they already were. The cold dislike in Lady Kingswold's regard had brought home to her the fact that her sojourn in that house might be of very much more brief duration than she had anticipated. And when that came to an end, what remained to her?

Almost mechanically her thoughts turned to Buck,

and then—with a slight effort—she remembered that she was angry with Buck.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she told herself with emphasis that she would sooner go to Otto Paul and consider his attractive business proposition than allow Buck to imagine for a single moment that she had failed in that which she had set out to do.

## CHAPTER X

### THE DESPISED THING

JEANNETTE found Dorothea in a very chastened frame of mind. The day's confinement had in fact quite broken her spirit, and she was both humble and remorseful when Jeannette entered and told her that her punishment was at an end.

"I've stayed in bed all day," she said dolefully, "though I hated it."

"I meant you to," said Jeannette.

"I might have got up if it hadn't been so cold," said Dorothea.

"I thought of that," said Jeannette. "That was why I locked your wardrobe."

Dorothea looked at her with pathos in her blue eyes. "Do you want me to say I'm sorry?" she asked.

"I don't mind in the least," said Jeannette. "You have been punished, and there is no more to be said."

Dorothea reached out a wavering hand. "Jeannette, won't you—won't you kiss me now that it's over?"

"Certainly, my dear," said Jeannette, and at once bestowed the solicited favour.

She did it kindly, but without enthusiasm, for she had no intention of discounting the punishment she had meted out. Moreover, she was never demonstrative save to

those most dear to her, and Dorothea emphatically was not of these.

When the latter tried to cling to her, she gently but decidedly released herself. "And now you had better get up," she said. "I will go and get you some water."

"I don't think I want to get up now," said Dorothea. "It isn't worth while."

"You will do exactly as I tell you," said Jeannette with brisk conviction.

When she returned with the water, Dorothea was already out of bed and beginning to dress.

She left her to complete her toilet and went to the schoolroom where she busied herself with making up the fire and attending to other small details that helped to make the room more comfortable. It was a dreary apartment at the best of times. It required some resolution not to compare it with the bright rooms at Starfields over which she had presided in happier days. She wondered if Buck had gone; she wondered why he had not followed her out to say good-bye. She wondered what work he had found to do.

"Something he is ashamed of apparently—or he would have told me," she said to herself. But even as she said it, she knew that this was an injustice. Buck would never do anything of which he was ashamed—a standard of rectitude which was praiseworthy in most people, but somehow contemptible in Buck! It merely denoted lack of initiative.

Dorothea presently trailed in in a dressing-gown and was at once and sharply sent back to her room to finish dressing. When she returned, Jeannette was sitting before the fire with a book. The bells of the church at the corner were ringing for evening service. Jeannette's eyes were fixed, her lips very tightly closed.

Dorothea drifted to a chair near and sat down. She

thought it odd that Jeannette did not look up or speak, but meekly accepted the treatment as part of the discipline which Jeannette saw fit to mete out.

But after a time something unusual in the atmosphere reached her consciousness. She looked at Jeannette and was amazed to see a tear hovering on those wonderful lower lashes that gave that strange deep look to the hawk-like eyes. She watched fascinated, not daring to move or speak, and the tear fell. Jeannette did not stir. She did not seem even to breathe. Her gaze remained fixed upon her book in a wide, unblinking stare that had about it something desperate.

The bells pealed on, filling the night with their sweet, unearthly music, now near, now far, as though a door were swinging to and fro between them and the world. Then suddenly they ceased, and there was silence.

Another tear fell upon Jeannette's book. She made a sharp, almost convulsed movement.

"Shall we go to church?" she said.

"Church!" said Dorothea, astonished.

"Yes, why not? Don't you ever go to church?" Jeannette turned upon her almost aggressively.

"Oh yes, of course!" said Dorothea. "Of course! Sometimes! I haven't been since my illness."

"We will go to-night," decided Jeannette, and rose with the words. "Put on your long coat! It's cold."

Dorothea hastened to obey. An evening service was something of an adventure and would make up to some extent for the dreariness of the day. She was moreover a little afraid of Jeannette in her present mood, and those dumb tears seemed to her rather dreadful. She wondered if her own delinquencies could have provoked them.

She was thankful when they met again in the passage to see that Jeannette was quite mistress of herself. She took

her arm and hugged it as they went downstairs together, and was overjoyed to receive a small pressure in return.

They met no one as they left the house. A single bell was calling as they crossed the square. The sky was bright with stars.

"We had better hurry," said Jeannette. "You mustn't catch cold."

"I shan't hurt," said Dorothea.

They entered the church, and found it already nearly full.

"There's some man here they make rather a fuss about," whispered Dorothea. "I can't remember his name."

They found seats at the end of the church which was a large one. The altar looked a very long way off. As Jeannette knelt, she felt as if her heart were dead within her and wondered why she had come. It had been the impulse of a moment to ease her suffering, but now she almost wished she had not obeyed it. Of what avail were forms and ceremonies to still a pain like hers?

The notes of the organ floated softly through the church. They had a mystic, far-away sound. Overhead, the bells ceased to call. She got up from her knees with a weary sensation of disillusionment. Life that once had been so full held nothing for her now. Her soul was empty of desire or hope. She had passed her zenith of happiness, and nothing could ever be the same to her again.

The service began, and she followed it in a mechanical, unthinking fashion. It soothed her because it was so familiar. Its keynote was simplicity, and the old, old chants, so dear to the hearts of the great majority and so often denied to them, were sung at a pitch which every member of the congregation could compass. This was what struck Jeannette first—the fact that the choir led

but did not dominate the musical part of the service. There was no straining after effect, no attempt to elaborate or modernize. It was the service of her childhood made beautiful by use and sacred by memory—a service which made her feel that her own individual share was needed, that to abstain from taking her part would be to shirk. Her heart began to stir again. She felt the warmth of comradeship around her. The people in that church were there not to be sung to, but to sing; not to be prayed for, but to pray.

As the service proceeded, she realized more and more the heartiness and spontaneity among the congregation, and she also noticed how large a proportion were men. No one seemed to be shirking, but rather to take so earnest a part that she felt ashamed at her own lack of enthusiasm. She began to sing, almost in spite of herself, and found it easier than she had thought, because everyone was singing. Just as the early Christians held their services, knowing that the Lord was there among them and would miss a single voice not raised in His praise, so the people of that church which clung to the old—because it was better—were moved to worship Him, drawn by that ancient magic which no lofty innovations can command, the magic of familiarity backed by that simplicity as of little children which is nearest to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The whole service was conducted upon the same principle. There was no part of it in which the congregation could not join, and it was complete, unmutilated by the hand of the reformer. The man who conducted it was not old, but extraordinarily young. He had the eager look of a boy.

"The curate no doubt!" was Jeannette's inner verdict. "How he must sneer at this old-fashioned performance!"

When he got into the pulpit and gave out his text, she felt convinced that she had diagnosed him correctly. For

the text was: *"Behold I make all things new."* She settled down to listen with an idea that everything was going to be spoilt by an up-to-date sermon. Then something in the man's manner caught her attention and made her doubtful. He began to speak, and she knew on the instant that it was no boy and no visionary to whom she listened, but a plain man talking of plain, every-day things. His language was vivid but not extravagant, his delivery direct, as though he spoke to the individual rather than the crowd. And Jeannette found her attention riveted.

He drew a picture of the Creation in a few simple words that conveyed something of the wonder and the newness of the world at its birth to his hearers. He described the gradual decay that followed, the decay of the ages side by side with the new life ever springing up.

"Have you ever realized," he said, "that nothing is ever lost?"

He went on rapidly to modern times, to the all-prevailing desire which was almost a lust, for newness and reform. He did not condemn it. It was human nature, the dissatisfied yearning of souls that were starved, turning the world upside down in search of nourishment. There was nothing wrong in it, but it was pitiable, it was futile.

"What we want," he said, "is not something completely new, such as we have never had before. Everything we need, both physically and spiritually, was given to us long ago. What many of us call reform is very often another species of corruption. The aspiration may be good, but the conception is often all wrong, only another form of death. What the world, social and political, concrete and mental, really needs is not new things, but the old things made new—God's gifts as they were in the beginning, freed from the petrifaction of antiquity and the rust of

disuse, restored to all their former beauty, sanctified afresh by His unchanging love.

"How many of us," he said, "have been given some treasure which possibly we have never properly appreciated, and of which long possession and use have completely robbed of all value? If we took that treasure up and rubbed away the rust and gave it a favoured place in our hearts, it might become a new thing of a beauty such as we had never dreamed of;—it might even turn out to be the one gift for which we have been insatiably craving all our lives. And we tossed it aside among the unwanted lumber and never knew it. Surely before the cry for reform goes up, it is only commonsense to ask ourselves if we are making the very utmost of what we have. Shall we not at least make an honest effort, even though it may entail some self-sacrifice,—which is one of the great ingredients of human happiness, if we only knew it—to make our old things new? Before we strike and demand better conditions, greater advantages, higher rewards, all at the expense of others—before we drag down the old customs, disown the old principles, revile the old virtues—shall we not stay our hands and consider lest we throw away the old good gifts and make a bonfire of those things which should have been the world's salvation? There is progress and there is retrogression, and we are apt to think that everything modern belongs to the former and all that is ancient to the latter. But, by throwing away the old things, by our reforms, our improvements, our many schemes for our own betterment, are we really advancing? Or is it the beginning of a great retreat that will end in rout and utter destruction? There is only one test by which we can make sure, and it is a test which every man, woman and child can apply. It is the test of the individual, the test of the nation, the test of the world. Is love at the root of our passion for reform?

Are we ready to promote it at the cost of self-sacrifice? Is it consecrated to the God Who gave us all we have? If so, all is well. And if so, I think we shall not wholly despise the old things because of their great age, for with a little care and perseverance, a little self-sacrifice and personal devotion, the rust of the ages can be removed, and He Who gave them will make them everlastingly new."

He turned again from the general to the individual point of view. It was so easy to lose patience with life, he said, so easy to pull down, so difficult to build, so easy to fling away, so infinitely difficult to find. How few recognized the greatest of all things when it came to them! And yet it was their own fault if they let it go again. People talked nowadays as if love were merely mortal—love that had conquered the world, defeated Death, and opened the Gates of Heaven. "People say, 'Yes, we loved each other once, but that is all over now.' How can it ever be over? If it is over, then it was never love. A physical attraction, a feeling of kinship, but not love. If we ever possessed it, it is still there among our possessions,—possibly at the very bottom of them all, but still there. Take up that despised thing, and you will see that it will still shine like a glow-worm in the darkness. Perhaps it is very old and worn, or perhaps it has never been used at all but flung into a corner and left. Take it up and bring it to the light! Did you ever realize, even when it was new, how lovely a thing it was? Probably not! Probably you were young in those days, and you had a good many pretty baubles which all seemed of about the same value. But the baubles are all gone with the years, and there is only this one thing left—the least attractive of them all possibly, a thing you never greatly valued or believed to be of value. Yet that was the one gift which could have made all the difference in your life, which would

have satisfied your craving and filled your empty soul. You never knew it? No! Neither did the high priests know the Lord of all the earth. But they might have known Him had they not been blinded with arrogance and the lust of power. And you might have known this for His direct and personal gift if you had received it with humility. But it meant so little to you that you threw it aside. You did not want it. Oh, you who yearn and strain after new things, look into your hearts and see first if there are any treasures there which you have wasted, see if your life holds nothing which can be made beautiful, see if you have despised the best gift of all; and if you find you have, if there is anything there which is unselfish and great, lift it up—lift it up and give it the rightful place in your lives,—in the Name of the Master Who maketh all things new."

So he ended, and Jeannette came out of what had almost seemed a trance to realize the congregation rising around her and the deep notes of the organ swelling through the church for the evening hymn.

Passing out in the crowd a few minutes later, she found herself side by side with a man of average height who drew back in the porch so that she might precede him. She glanced up with a passing smile of acknowledgment and looked straight into the eyes of Buck.

As it were by habit she stiffened, and then very suddenly she relaxed. Her eyes fell before his, almost as if abashed. "Good night, Buck!" she said, with a grave inclination of the head.

"Good night, Jeannette!" said Buck.

And they parted without another word.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MESSAGE

JEANNETTE received a summons to Lady Kingswold's boudoir on the following morning.

She found her pale and fretful upon her couch and knew at once that she was to be taken to task for the doings of the previous day.

"Miss Wyngold," she said without preliminary, "I have sent for you because I have several complaints to make."

"I am sorry for that," said Jeannette.

Lady Kingswold frowned her down. "Please do not speak until I have finished! In the first place I have very great fault to find with your treatment of my daughter. You took it upon yourself to punish her in a way which I consider most detrimental to her health, and I must beg that you will never do it again."

She paused, plainly for response, but Jeannette, having received her instructions, made none.

After a moment Lady Kingswold continued, evidently working herself up to still greater heights of annoyance as she proceeded. "You then went to a concert with my husband leaving your charge entirely unattended and still undergoing punishment. I do not know whether he was aware of this or not, but, whatever his attitude in the matter, I most strongly disapprove. Meantime, in your

absence, a young man—Mr. Wetherby—called and openly introduced himself as a friend of yours. It is not my habit, Miss Wyngold, to entertain the friends of my employees in my drawingroom, and the fact that my husband is slightly acquainted with him in no way mitigates the offence. After that, to crown your indiscretions, you take my daughter straight from bed to an evening service at a church to which I take very great exception, and the fact that she is not to-day in bed with bronchitis is one for which you are certainly not responsible."

Again Lady Kingswold paused and applied a smelling-bottle to her nose with some signs of exhaustion. Jeannette, very slim and upright, stood silent and motionless, waiting for more. Her eyes were discreetly lowered, her face quite expressionless yet somehow disdainful.

"Well?" demanded Lady Kingswold fretfully. "Have you nothing to say?"

The lowered eyes flashed swiftly over her. "No, I don't think so," said Jeannette, after brief reflection.

"Then please go away!" said Lady Kingswold pettishly. "I have had a very bad night in consequence of your escapades, and I really cannot stand any more."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Jeannette again.

"Go! Go!" said Lady Kingswold.

Jeannette whisked round and went. She closed the door swiftly but quite noiselessly behind her, and as she did so, Sir Jervis came out of a room further along the passage. He was on the verge of speech, but some impulse moved Jeannette to stop him. She made a rapid sign, and passed him by.

As she went up the stairs a muffled laugh escaped her. For some reason she had been longing to laugh from the outset. The whole situation was absurd, too ridiculous to give either pain or offence. That she—Jeannette Wyngold—should be treated thus! And Buck—her

faithful follower Buck! She laughed again. To be coupled with Buck as a fellow-delinquent was a new experience. She yearned to tell Lady Varleigh.

More than once during the day she found herself smiling afresh at the comic result of Buck's extremely proper and old-fashioned tactics. She wondered if she could possibly make him see the joke. For somehow it was a foregone conclusion that she would see Buck again. Not that evening certainly! He should wait at least once in vain, she decided, for the good of his soul. He had become far too presumptuous of late, and must be kept in his place. But perhaps the following day she might walk to the post at the corner after tea, and if Buck were there she might deign to notice him. But not to-night, —emphatically not to-night!

She repeated this resolution with some firmness to herself that evening, for when the time came she was alone. An unexpected summons from Lady Kingswold to her daughter deprived her of Dorothea's company at the very hour when Buck's vigil was taking place, and, try as she would, she could not get the thought of him out of her mind. Something within her argued that it was treating him badly to keep him waiting fruitlessly, and the only reply that she could find to that inner persistent voice was that he deserved to be treated badly. At the best, he had no claim upon her—no claim of any sort. Why he wanted to see her she could not imagine. Perhaps he was going to talk of South Africa again, to try to wring some species of appeal from her. Perhaps he flattered himself that she really cared whether he went or stayed! Her pointed chin rose to the old scornful tilt. Buck!

She knelt and busied herself with tidying the hearth, figuratively casting him from her. Yet, even as she did so, words which irresistibly brought him back began to run like a mocking chant through her brain. "Take up

that despised thing and bring it to the light! Did you ever realize—even when it was new—how lovely a thing it was?"

"Ridiculous!" said Jeannette. "There was nothing extraordinary about it. If he hadn't been so cussed, he'd have left off loving me long ago. It was only because he let it grow into a silly habit."

But the inner voice went on and would not be silenced. "The baubles are all gone, and there is only this one thing left—the least attractive of them all—a thing you never greatly valued or believed to be of value. Yet it was the one gift which could have made all the difference in your life."

"That is absurd!" said Jeannette, aloud and emphatically as she briskly put the fire together. "There are heaps of things in life besides love."

"Yes, but are they worth having?" questioned a voice behind her.

She looked round with a sharp exclamation and in a moment was on her feet. "Oh, that was unfair!" she said.

"Forgive me!" said Sir Jervis.

He stood looking at her with his strangely gleaming eyes, and as she did not speak he made a slight deprecatory gesture.

"You won't tell me it was unpardonable too, I hope?" he said.

She found it difficult to be indignant and abandoned the attempt. "Well, perhaps not important enough for that," she said. "But you startled me rather."

"I am sorry," he said. "You were making such a noise with the fire that you didn't hear me knock, so I just walked in."

"I see," said Jeannette. "Well, I am afraid Dorothea isn't here."

"Does that matter?" said Sir Jervis.

She gave him one of her quick glances, and realized that he had been aware of Dorothea's whereabouts before paying this visit to the schoolroom. She uttered a faint laugh.

"Not so far as I am concerned. But perhaps it is as well that you should know that Lady Kingswold regards my accompanying you to a concert on Sunday in the light of an escapade."

He made a movement of impatience. "Why do you tell me this?" he said, in a tone of weary irritation.

"Because I think you ought to know it," said Jeannette practically.

"You consider such a point of view deserves to be taken seriously?" he questioned.

She smiled. "Not by me, certainly. I find it merely amusing."

"Then let us dismiss it!" he said. "And anything else of an annoying nature that she may have said to you! Have you had your expected letter of Lady Varleigh to-day?"

She understood that he was deliberately turning the conversation, and she was by no means reluctant to follow his lead. What did Lady Kingswold and her petty attacks matter, after all? It was refreshing to be able to talk to someone sympathetic of her old friend. Almost before she knew how it had come about, she was seated before the fire with Lady Varleigh's letter—the weekly budget which had reached her that morning—in her hand.

She proceeded to read him extracts which she thought would interest him, while he sat facing her on the other side of the fire, listening, with one hand shading his eyes.

Occasionally, when Jeannette paused, he made some quiet remark, but for the most part he sat in silence, though she was aware of his close attention throughout.

There was a flippant reference to Buck towards the end which Jeannette had originally intended to omit; but when she came to it she decided that the subject was undeserving of subterfuge, so briefly read it.

"I presume that the ever-faithful Buck is still patiently biding his time, or have you cut the cable and sent him to South Africa? This reminds me of a story my last husband used to tell—though I don't know why it should—about a girl who broke her engagement and went across Canada to Japan to divert her mind, and the first person she met when she got there was the young man, who had gone there by the Eastern route to try and get over it. I always rather enjoyed that story as it seemed to demonstrate that though we may in our perversity put the whole world between us, we are never really out of reach of those we love."

Jeannette looked up. "Dear Lady Varleigh! She is very sentimental."

"She is indomitable," said Sir Jervis. "She puts her extraordinary vitality into everything. Thank you, Miss Wyngold. It was good of you to share that letter with me."

"There is a postscript," said Jeannette. "Perhaps I ought to have read that first. She says, 'Send me news of Sir Jervis when you write!'"

"Ah!" said Sir Jervis. "Then you may give her a message from me if you will."

"What is it?" said Jeannette.

He got up, and began to walk about the room. Some seconds elapsed before he spoke again.

"Miss Wyngold!" he said then.

"What is it?" repeated Jeannette.

He came to a stand facing her, leaning slightly upon the back of the chair he had left. His eyes, with their torch-like scrutiny, searched her face.

"Tell me," he said, "are you—in that secret soul of yours—laughing at this elderly romance?"

"I! Laughing!" said Jeannette. "No! I don't see anything funny in it."

"But you don't understand it?" he persisted.

Her eyes had been raised to meet his. She lowered them abruptly. It was as if she had dropped a veil between them. "Oh yes!" she said. "I understand."

There fell a silence during which his look never left her, but she would not lift her own again to meet it.

"I wonder if you do," he said at length.

She smiled, a faint, enigmatic smile, not speaking.

But, as though he had been answered, he continued. "There is an old-fashioned saying that love never dies, but there are very few who believe that now—probably very few who are capable of it. There are plenty who scoff at the bare idea. Yet here and there we come across it, like a precious stone dropped in the mud. And —there may be other things in life besides, but there is nothing else that really counts."

"Were you at church last night?" asked Jeannette suddenly.

"No," said Sir Jervis. "Why?"

"Oh, never mind!" she said. "It reminded me of something, that's all. I think you are right. When the real thing comes—if it comes—it is worth everything else put together. But—" again she smiled her remote little smile—"the stones are not all precious. That is why people scoff."

"But you are not one of the cynics!" he said. "You are too young."

Her eyes came up to his with a glint of steel. "I am not young enough to be taken in," she said. "No, I don't think I am a cynic, but no one can deny that life holds a good many ironies."

"Ah! Poor child!" he said compassionately. "But there are better things in store for you."

"I have had my good things," said Jeannette, but though her voice held resolution it was tinged with wistfulness also.

He was quick to detect it. "There are better things in store for you," he said again. "And if I might presume to advise you I should say, 'Wait! Don't take the first that comes!'"

She broke into a faint laugh. "Are you talking about Buck Wetherby? I assure you, he isn't the first, but the very, very last."

"I am glad of that," said Sir Jervis.

"And why?" said Jeannette.

"Because he is not nearly good enough for you," he answered with conviction.

"He is worse," said Jeannette. "He is much too good."

A gleam of amusement crossed Sir Jervis's face. "A dull dog, yes! Why does he follow you about if you have turned him down?"

Her look fell away from him again, so suddenly that he wondered if she were displeased. But her tone was cool and detached, as though she spoke on a wholly impersonal subject as she replied. "Probably for that very reason. It's the natural way with—dogs."

"Well, give me leave to send him about his business if he comes again!" said Sir Jervis.

Her odd secret smile flitted across her face. "I give you leave to try," she said.

"You don't think I shall succeed?" he said.

"No, I don't think so," said Jeannette. "But it really doesn't matter. I haven't the faintest intention of marrying him whether he stays or goes, and he knows it."

"Do you like him hanging round then?" said Sir Jervis.

"I don't mind if it amuses him," said Jeannette indifferently.

"The fellow can't have much pride," remarked Sir Jervis.

"He is incapable of anything of that kind," said Jeannette.

"He is a fool then?"

She nodded thoughtfully, her eyes upon the fire. "Yes. I should say he is a fool."

"And he dares to lift his eyes to you?" Sir Jervis spoke with indignation.

Jeannette made a slight movement as of restraint. "Or lower them," she said. "It depends upon the point of view."

"You are miles above him in every way," protested Sir Jervis.

But she shook her head. "Oh no! Oh no! My value has depreciated. That is partly why I think him a fool. I actually believe that he wants me more now, than he did before." Again faintly she smiled, her eyes upon the fire. "Possibly your precious stone shines brighter when it is in the mud!" she said.

"But you don't want him!" said Sir Jervis.

"Oh no. I don't want him." Her eyelids flickered for a moment. "Yet—I am so used to him that I believe I should miss him, if he went away; just as one misses the ticking of a clock. One never notices it till it stops."

"What an extraordinary girl you are!" he said. "And what does Lady Varleigh say?"

"Oh, Lady Varleigh would like me to marry him, but then she is always in favour of experiments. She has made so many herself."

"You mustn't think of marrying him," said Sir Jervis very decidedly.

"I don't," said Jeannette.

"You never will?" he insisted.

She turned her head with a curiously majestic movement and looked at him. "When I am quite convinced," she said, "that there is nothing else in life so valuable and so altogether desirable as Buck Wetherby's love, then—I shall certainly marry him; not before."

"But that will never happen!" he said.

She raised her shoulders slightly. "Probably not. Meantime, you were going to give me a message."

"I was," said Sir Jervis.

"Well?" said Jeannette.

"My love," he said.

"Is that all?" said Jeannette.

"It is all I have to give," he said. "My love—my undying love!"

"Very well," said Jeannette. She turned quietly in her chair. "You can come in, Dorothea. There is no occasion for you to wait in the passage."

Dorothea pushed open the door and entered, looking half-triumphant and half-ashamed.

Sir Jervis stood up and regarded his young daughter with a certain grimness. "How long have you been out there?" he said.

"I've only just come up," she said defiantly.

"Have you had a good time?" asked Jeannette.

The girl came and stood beside her. "No. They were a mouldy lot down there. Mother's friends always are."

"Well, I had better go down and see them," said Sir Jervis, turning with the words. "Good night, Miss Wyngold! Good night, Dorothea!"

The door closed behind him, and Dorothea subsided on her knees before the fire. "I'm glad he's gone," she said. "He never used to come up here."

"Indeed!" said Jeannette.

Dorothea looked round at her curiously. "What was he talking to you about?"

"Nothing that you would understand," said Jeannette.

"That means he was making love to you," said Dorothea, "I thought so."

Jeannette sat up very erect in her chair. "Dorothea," she said, her voice very level and distinct, "I warn you that if you ever say anything of that sort to me again, I shall punish you very severely."

Dorothea flinched a little, but made an attempt to hold her own. "I shall tell my mother if you do," she said.

"In that case," said Jeannette with great firmness, "I shall resign my post here immediately."

"You'd probably have to," said Dorothea.

"I shall not wait for that," said Jeannette.

"But you've nowhere to go to," said Dorothea.

Whereat Jeannette laughed with scorn. "I could find a better post than this to-morrow if I cared to look for it."

"Jeannette! How?" Dorothea regarded her, round-eyed.

But Jeannette refused to satisfy her curiosity. "When I decide that I really cannot stand you any longer, my dear, perhaps you will know," she said.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE PRAYER

On the following evening Jeannette had decided to reward Buck's patient vigil by at least a glimpse of herself as she went to post her letter to Lady Varleigh, but when the hour arrived a heavy rain had set in which threatened to last all night.

"You can't mean to go out in this," said Dorothea. "Send William to the post!"

"I will wait a little and see," said Jeannette.

But when a little later a message came from the drawingroom inviting them both to join Lady Kingswold, she decided to go herself.

Dorothea departed grumbling, and she went to her room to don hat and mackintosh and then sallied forth. The rain was descending in torrents, but it did not daunt her. She had always been accustomed to go out in all weathers, and the sense of freedom did her good. She had been struggling against a deadly fit of depression the whole day.

"I don't think I can stand this life much longer," she said to herself, as she splashed along the streaming pavement by the dim light of lamp-posts that wholly failed to illuminate the empty square. "I must do something that will tire me and make me sleep."

For the nights were becoming a perpetual, interminable misery to her, and she knew that her nerves were beginning to feel the strain. It was more to divert her thoughts than for any other reason that she had decided to come out to meet the faithful Buck. She did not really want to meet him. "Perhaps he hasn't come!" she reflected, but had a fleeting smile at the bare idea. Of course he would come!

Nearing the pillar-box that stood under a lamp immediately facing the church, she slackened her pace. Whatever the weather, he must not think she was in a hurry to meet him. It would be bad enough if he imagined that she had come at all for that purpose.

She reached the post, and dropped her letter into it. Then she glanced round. Buck was nowhere to be seen! She was conscious of a sudden tightness at her heart. Having waited for her in vain yesterday, did he dare to take it for granted that she would not come to-day? Or perhaps the rain had discouraged him! Pshaw! The rain! He would be a fainthearted lover indeed if he allowed himself to be deterred by such a circumstance as that.

But then—she had rejected him as lover. Perhaps as mere friend he had decided to show more commonsense. A very bitter curve drew Jeannette's mouth. Always there when not wanted, to-night when she did want him, he was absent. How typical of Buck!

The church-porch yawned black above the steps. She wondered if the place were locked. Somehow she did not think so. A locked church did not go with the simple devotion of the service she had attended there. The darkness only meant that the inner baize doors were closed. There would be light within.

Something drew her; she knew not what. She went up the steps through the pouring rain and entered the

dark porch. She saw at once that it was as she had suspected. A glimmer of light outlined the inner door. She groped her way forwards and pushed it open. The church, dimly-lit, mysterious, stretched in front of her. She entered and the door closed softly.

The place was utterly still save for the sound of rain upon the roof. At first she thought it empty, a great solitude that yet was not void, but strangely, palpably filled with a Presence that comforted her.

She stood for a space quite motionless, then slowly, as one irresistibly drawn, went up the long dim aisle. The altar shone like a distant beacon. Her feet carried her towards it almost without her own volition. She only knew a dumb longing to cast herself down before it and weep her very heart out in the silence. It was so seldom that she could ease her grief with tears.

And then, half-way up the church, she saw him,—a man in a shabby mackintosh kneeling with clenched hands over his face in a posture of such intense supplication that instinctively she paused, as if afraid to trespass. A sharp misgiving went through her, as though she had looked upon something which her eyes were not meant to see. She did not like to draw any nearer, for somehow it seemed to her that here was a need even greater than her own. After a few seconds of irresolution she slipped into a pew and sat down.

The great quietness came all about her like a benediction, and her own heartache became mystically stilled. Her thoughts no longer centred upon herself, but hovered pityingly about the silent figure in front of her —her sole companion in that holy place. What manner of man was he, she wondered? What were his circumstances? What the urgent need that had drawn him thither to pour out the anguish of his soul? Was he praying? Was he sunk in despair, wandering, as she had

wandered, through depths of misery and loneliness towards a goal unknown and undesired? Like herself, was he perhaps bereft of all in life that mattered? Had he lost the one being without whom the world was but a blackened desert?

She felt the tears begin to rise again; but they were not for herself, but for this other lonely traveller along the stony way. She had never before realized the misery of the world as she realized it now, though it must often have been very close to her. She had never before so earnestly desired to help a fellow-being unknown to her.

But there was nothing apparently that she could do, unless perchance to pray for him. The thought came to her, and after a moment, with an odd wonder at herself, she slipped to her knees. Her own need was beyond prayer. Nothing could restore to her what she had lost, and she could not think of anything to take its place. All that she had ever desired had been swept irrevocably from her grasp. Her life was empty now, and could never be anything else. But with this stranger it might be different. He was praying so hard—so desperately hard—for something, and a half-whimsical impulse moved her to join her prayers to his.

"O God," she prayed, "give him his heart's desire, if it is by any means possible!" And then, rather shakenly, very deep down in her heart: "If he is in trouble about someone beloved, give him comfort and relief!"

Her prayer ended, but she knelt on for a space, revelling in the peace, no longer conscious of sorrow, hardly aware of thought. The kneeling figure a few pews in front of her might have been carved in stone, such was its immobility.

But suddenly there came an interruption. The clock in the steeple chimed rhythmically, musically, and the spell was broken. Half-past-five! Jeannette realized

that she had come out a few minutes early. Her watch must be fast. The only other occupant of the church realized something also, for he gave a great start as if someone had called him, and in a moment was on his feet.

As Jeannette got up from her knees, he passed her, looking neither to right nor left, and went out through the silent doors. She sat back in utter amazement, her heart beating violently, spasmodically,—shocked beyond expression. For in the dimness she had seen his face—the face of a man who had spent himself to the last ounce of his strength. And it was the face of Buck Wetherby.

It was some minutes later that she left the church by another door and found her way into a dark alley that led back between nigh fences to the square. The moment she turned the corner she saw him waiting for her under the lamp that lighted the pillar-box, waiting with a stolid patience in the dripping night that had more of endurance about it than of hope.

She was quite sure that he did not expect her, for he made no move to meet her until she was quite close to him. But then he moved with a swiftness that she found strangely disconcerting. Oddly, in that instant she had a feeling that she was in the presence of a total stranger.

Then he spoke, and in a rush familiarity returned.

"Jeannette!" he said. "You shouldn't have come out—in this!"

Yet there was an unwarrantable note of exultation in his voice, and it was to that that she made reply.

"I came—to post a letter."

He blundered at once, with his customary lack of tact. "Where is it? I'll post it."

"You needn't trouble," said Jeannette. "I have done so."

"Oh! You have been here before! You have been

waiting! I'm awfully sorry." Yet still that hint of exultation mingled with his compunction.

She deemed it advisable to pass his somewhat clumsy deductions by. "I am just going back," she said.

But foolishly he persisted, rushing headlong to his own destruction. "I say, how decent of you to wait out in the rain for me! If I had only known! I was only just inside the church."

He spoke with absolute simplicity, and she felt a pang at her heart. She did not want to be cruel to him that night, yet she had no choice. She dared not be kind. She had seen his suffering, and it had hurt her unspeakably to see it. It was greater than she had ever imagined it to be, and something must be done to stop it.

She summoned her resolution. The break must be made now, at once; and it must be final, whatever the effort cost.

"Buck," she said, "before you say any more, I have got to tell you something. I can't meet you again. It wouldn't be treating you fairly if I did. You will have to set to work and forget me. Do you understand? This thing has gone too far, and it must come to an end."

"What thing?" said Buck.

She could have shaken him for his idiocy if she had not pitied him so intensely.

"You know what I mean," she said. "You must know. You are wasting yourself, spoiling your whole life for the sake of a dream. You must wake up. Do you hear?" A tinge of impatience crept into her speech, making it vehement. He was so dull, so obtuse; he clung with such obstinacy to this thing that was wounding him so deeply. Could he not see that it would wound beyond remedy if he persisted? "You must wake up and go. Go to South Africa as you suggested weeks ago! Go anywhere rather than hang about here!"

"It's too late now for that South African scheme," said Buck patiently. "And I'm not hanging about, you know. I'm at work."

"Well, you must go elsewhere for work," Jeannette insisted. "Or else I must. One of us must go."

"Why?" said Buck.

Again she felt goaded to exasperation, and again the memory of what she had seen restrained her. She replied almost with gentleness. "Because we can't go on like this. At least I can't. I don't want to be unkind to you, but you have got to realize that your case is hopeless. I do not think that I have ever given you any encouragement, yet you behave as if—as if——"

She broke off curiously at a loss; for he was listening so patiently, so courteously, just as he always listened to anything she had to say. And it was usually so easy to snub him, but to-night she could not—she could not. She had seen too much of his suffering, and she had suffered too deeply herself to inflict it lightly any more.

"As if?" questioned Buck, with a solicitude that struck her as both ludicrous and pathetic.

She swallowed hard. No, she could not snub him. Perhaps for the first time in her life, she spoke to him as an equal.

"Buck," she said, "I want you to try and be sensible, to stop harbouring hopes that can never be fulfilled. You are hurting yourself for nothing, and you are hurting me too."

"Hurting you?" said Buck, incredulity, compunction, and—was it still exultation?—in his voice.

"Oh, can't you understand?" she said, persevering in spite of a growing sense of futility. "I have done wrong to let you stay near me."

"But you couldn't help that," said Buck consolingly.

"Can't you understand?" she cried again. "It is hopeless, quite hopeless."

"But you always told me that," said Buck.

"And you won't believe it!" said Jeannette, torn between anger and despair.

"But I don't see how you are to blame for that," he said. "Surely if I go on in spite of you—surely that's my funeral, not yours!"

"Oh, you idiot!" said Jeannette.

She did not want to say it, but she was compelled. It was the only thing left to say. And as she said it, the tears welled up beyond control, and ran down her face. She turned sharply away from him.

But he was with her in a second, his hand within her arm notwithstanding her blind attempt to dislodge it.

"Jeannette! Jeannette!" His voice came to her through the dreary drip of the rain. "Don't cry—don't cry—my dear! Please don't! It isn't your fault."

She fought with her weakness with fierce effort and overcame it. "No. It isn't my fault," she said. "It's yours. You—you have no right to hurt me like this."

It was an ungenerous weapon to use, but she had no great choice of weapons at the moment. And her need was great.

"I would rather die than hurt you," he said very earnestly.

She stood still, making, as it were, her last stand against him. "Then stop!" she said. "Stop wasting your time! Stop seeking me out! Stop thinking about me! It's no good, I tell you. It's no good. If—if you don't want to make me utterly miserable—as well as yourself——"

"I am not miserable," said Buck, with astounding sincerity.

She stared at him in the vague lamplight and gasped.

"I am not miserable," he said again, and in spite of

what she had seen in the church she knew beyond all doubting that he spoke the truth. "But if meeting me makes you unhappy, then of course we won't meet any more until you have got over it."

If Skittles had made that speech, it would have been unbearable audacity, but from Buck it was somehow natural and wholly free from effrontery. He wanted to comfort and soothe her. No thought of presumption was in his mind.

"Don't fret!" he said. "Please don't fret! I won't get in your way any more. I am sorry if I made a mistake in coming to see you on Sunday. I won't come again. There! Now you will leave off being unhappy, won't you? Promise!"

He smiled at her, and his smile was disarming. What could she say to him? His stupidity completely baffled her. It was as if he held it before him as a shield against her deadliest darts.

She felt too tired to battle further. "What did you want to see me about?" she said.

"Oh, only to make sure you were all right," he said, "being properly treated and so on. And to warn you—just to warn you—not to be drawn into any friendship with that K. C. fellow. He is rather a rapid traveller, I believe."

"I don't know what you mean," said Jeannette.

"You wouldn't," said Buck. "But take it from me! Don't have too much to do with him! Lady Kingswold is an unhappy woman, and she has some cause to be."

"If that's what you mean," said Jeannette, with some sharpness, "she has no cause whatever. She is an idiot!"

"Do you always know an idiot when you see one?" said Buck.

Jeannette turned with decision and began to walk back. "I would always rather not," she said.

He tramped beside her along the wet pavement. In the darkness after a moment she heard him laugh.

"No, you don't suffer fools gladly, do you?" he said. "Yet—the fools have their uses sometimes."

Jeannette deigned no rejoinder. When Buck tried to be clever, silence was the only course.

They reached the tall house on the further side of the square, and as they did so the flaring lights of an approaching car shone upon them. It slid to a standstill simultaneously with their arrival.

"Good night!" said Buck. "Thank you for coming out to meet me."

His hand clasped hers in the old friendly way. The car-door opened behind him, but he did not turn his head.

"Good night!" said Jeannette.

She was aware of Sir Jervis descending and felt unaccountably nervous.

Buck stooped towards her. "Don't fret any more!" he said gently. "Everything is going to be all right."

"Good night!" said Jeannette again, and freed her hand.

As Buck turned away into the darkness, she realized that Sir Jervis was standing in the rain waiting for her to precede him up the steps.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE OPAL

"It is a very wet night for you to be out," said Sir Jervis, as he inserted his latch-key in the lock.

"Yes, it is wet," agreed Jeannette.

She resented the feeling of being caught in an indiscreet action which his manner seemed to convey, and as she entered the house she gave him a brisk nod and prepared to pass on.

But to her surprise he detained her. "Miss Wyngold, you must be wet through. Have you a good fire upstairs?"

"I hope so," said Jeannette.

"Is Dorothea there?" he asked.

"No. I believe she is in the drawing room."

A servant came up, silent-footed, and helped Sir Jervis to remove his coat.

"Good night!" said Jeannette, and left him.

She passed lightly up the three flights that led to the schoolroom.

She found it empty as she had anticipated, but a bright fire burned there and drew her to the hearth. She went to it without waiting to take off her mackintosh, and stooped to warm her hands.

Her thoughts went back to Buck. Had he really taken her at her word? Would he go away now to the other

side of the world? A queer little shiver caught her. She bent lower over the glow. The last link was snapped. Save for Lady Varleigh, who was so far away, all connection with her old life was now severed.

She would miss him. Yes, she would certainly miss him, but more for the sake of that connection than for any other reason, so she told herself. But she was not justified in letting him stay on that account. She fully realized that. She had acted selfishly, but it had been through ignorance rather than wantonness. She had not meant to hurt him. She had taken it for granted that he understood her attitude and accepted the hopelessness of his love. From his friendly attitude she had even begun to fancy that he had in a measure conquered it. Poor Buck! Ah well!

She straightened herself sharply at a sound at the door, and saw Sir Jervis enter with a slight frown of annoyance. She did not want Sir Jervis just then. She wanted to be alone—to give Buck, as it were, decent burial.

But he came forward with obvious purpose, and she saw that there was no dismissing him.

"You haven't taken off your wet things yet," he said, and with a half-humorous shake of the head began to unbutton her mackintosh.

"Please don't trouble!" said Jeannette.

"My dear child," he rejoined, "don't you know that I regard you as my especial charge? I am not going to have you laid up with a chill if I can help it."

"I never take chills," protested Jeannette.

"Then you have more luck than you deserve," he said.

He looked at her with a smile that banished all resentment. She stood still while he slipped the streaming garment from her shoulders.

"There, that is better," he said. "Are your feet wet?"

"I don't know," said Jeannette.

"Sit down!" he said gently. "You are tired. Why did you go out in this bad weather to meet that young Wetherby?"

Why had she gone? Jeannette tried to send her thoughts back to the state of mind that had led her forth, before she had seen Buck kneeling in agonized prayer in the church. But she could not wholly recall it or fathom her motives for going.

"I don't know," she said again.

It was quite true that she was tired, for the nights brought her no rest. Almost mechanically she suffered herself to be pressed into a chair.

"You shouldn't have gone," said Sir Jervis.

He was on his knees on the hearth. He poked the fire to a blaze and turned to her.

"Now for those wet shoes!" he said, and began to loosen one of them with the words.

She bent forward quickly to prevent him. "Oh, please don't!" she said. "My feet are quite all right."

But he gently insisted. "No, no! Let me have this pleasure! Your feet are very wet indeed. Poor little girl!"

He murmured the last words almost to himself, and Jeannette realized that he had detected the traces of tears on her face. She leaned back with a weary sigh. After all, there was no harm in his ministrations and in a fashion they comforted her. There were so few friends left to her now.

She watched him somewhat apathetically draw off her shoes and set them in the fender to dry, too tired and too dispirited to remonstrate further.

"You have had tea?" said Sir Jervis.

"Yes."

He stood up and pulled a chair to her side. "Miss Wyngold," he said, as he sat down, "I am going to take

the privilege of an old friend—in spite of the fact that our acquaintance is not of very long duration."

"Oh, I know what you are going to say," said Jeannette. "But you needn't. I am not going to meet him again, and I have told him so."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Sir Jervis gravely.

Something in his tone stirred her to indignation. "I don't know why you should be," she said. "I assure you he is the soul of virtue."

"That I do not question," said Sir Jervis. "But he is not the man for you, and I am glad that you have decided not to encourage him any more."

"I never have encouraged him," said Jeannette.

He passed the assurance by. "You are young. You have your life before you. You must not act in a hurry. I need scarcely say that you will always be a welcome guest in my house."

"I don't regard myself as a guest," said Jeannette, with a faintly wry smile.

He reached out a hand, and laid it with a paternal touch upon her arm. "Jeannette, you are the most welcome visitor I have received in the past twenty years."

That moved her a little. "It is very kind of you to say so," she said.

He went on. "A good many people would point to me and say that my life had been a successful one. Yet there have been times in it when success has been to me as gall and wormwood. It is only when someone like you comes by that one feels the healing touch. I can forget everything when I am with you."

Against her will, the words that Buck had uttered that evening arose in Jeannette's mind. She banished them impatiently, but she did not wholly forget them.

"I don't feel that I can do much for anyone now," she said.

"You can do very much," said Sir Jervis. He paused a moment, then continued with a quietness that gave the words an ordinary sound. "The very fact of having you in my charge is making all the difference to me. You have suffered, and I feel that I may be privileged to help you. It is just that that I need."

"You are very kind," said Jeannette.

His hand was still on her arm. There was something insistent in its pressure, though his voice conveyed so little. "I am not kind, Jeannette," he said. "I am only following afar off a vision that can never be mine."

A vague embarrassment awoke within her. Buck's warning came again. She turned and looked at him very steadily.

"Surely you know what I mean," he said in answer. "You surely cannot misunderstand. When I see you tired, lonely, sad, how can I do otherwise than long to comfort you? Are we such slaves of convention that this form of friendship cannot be permitted to us—a friendship founded upon so sacred a foundation? You are young, but you have seen the world. You know the gold from the dross."

"I am beginning to know," said Jeannette.

"Contact with life is teaching you," he said.

"But that is not everything," said Jeannette. "Knowledge is not enough. We have got to think of others as well as ourselves. That is another thing that life is teaching me." She uttered an involuntary sigh. "I never realized before how easy it is to hurt people without knowing—or caring. And then we blame them for what—possibly—has been our fault all along."

There was a suspicion of tears in her voice. The thought of Buck weighed heavily upon her. Was Lady Kingswold miserable in the same way, she wondered? Were half the people in the world suffering because of

the selfishness and callousness of the other half? Was that the key to all mortal misery? If so, oh, she had contributed more than her share, and the thought made her sick at heart.

"Some people are hurt for no reason at all," said Sir Jervis. "We are not responsible for that."

"If we stop to think," said Jeannette, "we may find out that we are."

She spoke with an effort. The physical strain of appearing normal when she was really tired out, added to the mental strain of that evening had told upon her. Her self-control was precarious.

He patted her arm gently as one who understood. "Don't let that thought worry you!" he said. "You are tired to-night, and everything is dark and out of proportion. Life will change presently, and you will see the bright side of things again. You were made for the bright side of life, Jeannette."

She smiled rather wanly. "I wasn't made to be idle anyway, and I shall have to take up something different from what I am doing now to fill up my time."

"What do you mean by that?" said Sir Jervis.

She heard a note of pain in his voice though he tried to suppress it, and that newly-awakened sympathy with suffering made her careful in her reply.

"I mean that, though you have shown me so much kindness and deeply as I appreciate it, my work here is not enough. It doesn't occupy my mind sufficiently, and I must try and find something harder and more engrossing. Besides, Dorothea is getting stronger, and if Lady Kingswold is really going to take her and her sister to Switzerland after Christmas, I shall be no longer needed."

"Is she proposing to do that?" asked Sir Jervis, in a tone of some surprise.

Jeannette glanced at him and felt a touch of pity. Man

of the world as he was, he struck her at that moment as somehow forlorn.

"Only according to Dorothea," she said. "It may be only a dream."

"It is quite possibly true," he said. And, after a pause: "So you are planning to leave us!"

"I shall probably have to in any case," said Jeannette, with an instinctive effort to be common-place.

"You will never have to leave this house so long as I am in it," said Sir Jervis quietly.

"Thank you," she said, and bent forward with a briskness she did not feel to poke the fire.

His hand fell from her arm as she had intended, and, though her heart smote her for her lack of sympathy she was glad to feel it gone. She was conscious of an unaccustomed embarrassment, as if an almost false intimacy had arisen between them, and she cast about in her mind for the best means of re-establishing the old impersonal footing. Above all things she desired to avoid his confidence, but for the moment she was at a loss. The dread of wounding returned upon her with morbid persistence. She had wounded so many in the old days before she had known what suffering meant.

She poked at the fire vigorously. How was she going to divert her course, how evade the difficulties that she saw ahead? He offered her no assistance, but sat in unbroken silence, as it were lost in thought.

Suddenly she heard him utter a low exclamation. She glanced round sharply. He was looking at her with an expression which completely baffled her.

"Child!" he said, and stooped towards her.

The next instant she understood. The strange jewel which Lady Varleigh had given her on that tragic day, her birthday, had fallen from its habitual hiding-place and was hanging from her neck. He took it into his

hand, still looking at her with an intensity that startled her.

She spoke nervously, breaking the silence. "Lady Varleigh gave it to me. It was her greatest treasure. She did not want to risk—leaving it behind."

"I see," said Sir Jervis. And still his eyes with their fiery earnestness searched her face. "So it has passed to you," he said, "—my wonderful opal! Do you know what it means? It is 'the experience of misfortune that engenders hope.' It was my talisman for years. And now—" he bent closer to her—"child, how can I help loving you? You are as my own!"

The words burst from him. They were like the breaking of a spell. Jeannette got up quickly with a sharp sense of tragedy, and as she did so the door opened with an abruptness that was almost violent. She turned to see Lady Kingswold, white of face and with livid lips, standing on the threshold.

Sir Jervis was on his feet in a second. He met his wife with a swiftness of movement that seemed as if it sought to screen the girl behind him. It was the worst thing he could possibly have done, Jeannette reflected afterwards.

Lady Kingswold advanced. She was trembling from head to foot.

"You needn't try to deceive me," she said to her husband in frozen accents. "I heard what you said just now."

"You may have heard," said Sir Jervis. "You did not understand."

She regarded him for a moment with fixed scorn, then turned upon Jeannette a look of indescribable malignity.

"Where did you get that jewel?" she said, and pointed a shaking finger at the deep red stone that hung quivering with opalescent radiance at the end of its slender chain.

"There is no need to ask that," interposed Sir Jervis

very quietly. "You know quite well that it could only have come from me."

"Yes. I know," said Lady Kingswold. She went close to Jeannette, and there was something terrible in her movement; it was like the creeping of a panther.

Jeannette awaited her, quite upright, wholly unflinching.

"What have you to say?" demanded Lady Kingswold. "How do you account for that stone being in your possession?"

"I?" said Jeannette, and raised her head with great pride. "I have no need to account for it. It was given me for luck."

"For—luck!" Swift as a panther's spring came the blow, and Jeannette staggered, so utterly unexpected was it.

She felt the chain at her neck dragged to a cruel tension, then it snapped with a sting like a whip, and she was free. She went backwards gasping, her hands over her face.

A voice—Dorothea's—shrieked in the background, and another—Lady Kingswold's—answered it with a wild burst of laughter. Jeannette looked up, to see Sir Jervis, white as death, come to her. His eyes were terrible, his look compelled.

"Go!" he said. "Go quickly! I will deal with this."

She had no choice. She turned and went. As she did so, she saw that Lady Kingswold was bent over the fire, like a witch over her cauldron, and was stirring something deeply into it.

She knew what it was, but she did not linger. Lady Varleigh's most precious possession was beyond all desecration now.

So also was the romance of which it had been the symbol.

# PART IV

## CHAPTER I

### THE STEPPING-STONE

Otto Paul, immense in his stoutness, sat in his private room at The Caravan Theatre and smoked a large cigar, studying the returns of his latest revue "The Brain Wave" the while. It was eminently pleasant reading, for the figures were high, and he had good reason to believe that they eclipsed those of his chief rival The Oasis Theatre in which that popular musical comedy "The Bright Spot" was having so successful a run.

But then "The Brain Wave" was exceptionally well staged and so modern as to be almost ahead of the times, while "The Bright Spot" relied to a certain extent upon the sentiment which old-fashioned people call "love interest," and Otto Paul had prophesied for some time that this would ultimately be its ruin. Sentiment was retrogressive, prehistoric. He would have none of it. Paganism by all means, any amount of it,—beauty, as much as you could get for your money, and if any girl in the chorus were ever caught looking or behaving other than "in the pink" she vanished at once from the boards of The Caravan. Immorality of a very subtle and exquisitely refined description was also given discreet ex-

pression under Otto Paul's able and experienced management. It imparted that inimitable touch of smartness so indispensable to success, and yet it was far too daintily conveyed to give offence to the susceptible. He was an adept at presenting an ugly idea in a radiant garb, and his vogue at that time was at its height. He never crossed swords with the Censor though people often wondered audibly between the acts how he managed to avoid doing so.

"A dirty rogue!" was Lady Varleigh's succinct summing up of him. "But a very clever one!"

His fat pale face as he studied the papers in his podgy hands was practically devoid of expression, save for an occasional glint in his beady eyes which might have denoted either pleasure or anger. Otto Paul's features never betrayed any reliable indication as to the state of his mind or the contents thereof. In his deadliest moods —and he could be deadly on occasion—he invariably looked the incarnation of mild self-satisfaction, and his voice was never other than unctuous and benevolent though the words he uttered might hold the sting of scorpions.

He was considerably younger than most people imagined, and his sleek black hair was untouched by any suggestion of white. Some there were who asserted that he was even yet in the early thirties, though his stoutness prevented general credence being given to the statement. He was clean-shaven and quite unlined, his mouth wide, with inward-turning lips conveying a sense of crafty humour that was somehow unpleasant. No one ever liked Otto Paul at first sight, and very few had occasion to do so afterwards, though his amiability was usually so patent as to be practically his hall-mark.

As he looked up at length from the report and tipped the ash from his cigar, it became so obvious as to give

him almost a gorged expression. There was a gas-fire burning in the room and the heat was intense. He stretched forth a finger and pressed an electric button on the table at which he sat.

Immediately the door opened and a slim, liveried urchin with a scared face looked in on him.

"I can see the lady now," said Otto Paul.

The boy vanished with electricity as swift as that which had summoned him. Otto Paul replaced the cigar in his mouth and leaned back in his chair, his head resting reposefully against the rolled leather cushion. His black eyes, nearly closed, watched the door.

It opened again in a few moments with the same stealthy silence as before. "Miss Wyngold!" piped the urchin.

Otto Paul sat slowly forward. A girl, very upright, with dainty carriage and pale set face came into the room.

"Ah, Miss Wyngold!" he said rather fatuously, and held out his hand with a slight upward hoist from his chair which dispensed with the ceremony of rising. "I'm afraid I have kept you waiting. You see how busy I am," with a glance at his littered desk.

"Yes, I see," said Jeannette.

She spoke with brevity. She hated the man, but she had come on business and it was something of a relief to find that he desired to waste no time upon convention.

She shook hands with him very perfunctorily, and sat down in a chair he indicated close to him, pushing it back a yard or so as she did so.

Otto Paul's eyes gleamed a little in their inscrutable way. "You are a wonderful girl," he said. "Now what can I do for you?"

Jeannette's look was direct but wholly unfathomable.

"You gave me to understand that if I came to you you might be able to find me work," she said.

He elevated his brows slightly. "Did I put it like that?" he questioned, as if searching his memory.

"You said you would be able to put a business proposition before me which you thought I would accept," said Jeannette.

"Ah, yes." He looked at her appreciatively. "That was exactly it. It was your face, was it not? Let me see! You were with Sir Jervis Kingswold, I think?"

"I have just left them," said Jeannette. "They are going abroad, and in any case I want something different."

He nodded his understanding. "Something of a more interesting nature to develop more fully the undoubted gifts of your attractive personality."

"Something by which I can earn my own living," said Jeannette.

"Ah, quite so, quite!" He opened his eyes a little wider to take her in. "You realize of course," he said, "that to gain success at The Caravan everything depends upon personality. In my opinion it is above rubies—far above mere beauty, which, as no doubt you are aware, you possess in no mean degree."

"Well?" said Jeannette, without the faintest sign of gratification. "How is it going to help?"

"Have you ever been on a stage before?" asked Otto Paul.

"In private theatricals, yes," said Jeannette.

"You have played a leading rôle?"

"Once or twice; not often." She spoke with a hint of impatience. Did the man really imagine that she expected to be offered anything more than the part of a super?

He regarded her with amusement in his little, cunning

eyes. "Now, Miss Wyngold," he said, "will you please do me a favour?"

"What is it?" said Jeannette.

"Take off that feather-bed of a coat and let me see your figure!"

She looked at him for a moment, just for one moment of outraged dignity; then very quietly she rose and slipped out of her heavy coat.

"Ah, that is nice!" said Otto Paul.

He leaned back again with a voluptuous sigh and suffered his gaze to move slowly over her. Again the gorged look was on his face.

Jeannette stood perfectly still, as if she were posing for a picture. Whatever the revolt at her heart, she betrayed no sign of it during those few seconds of appraisement, enduring it with a business-like composure that refused to admit embarrassment.

He spoke at length in soft, almost sleepy tones. "You are exactly what I want, Miss Wyngold. Dressed as I should like to see you dressed, you will be superb."

That awoke a sudden doubt in Jeannette's mind. Her grey eyes flashed over him without lingering. "I am not prepared to wear anything indecent," she said bluntly.

He waved a deprecating hand at her. "We are never indecent at The Caravan, my dear Miss Wyngold. Indecency of the open, blatant kind is going out of fashion. Didn't you know? Like divorce, it has become too ordinary to be the smart thing any longer. No, no, no! What I meant was something quite different, infinitely more artistic. Believe me, we do not rely upon any sordid effects for success. We attract the public by suggestion only, a gentle titillation of the grosser senses. Vice is only distorted innocence, you know; therefore—we magnify innocence. Do you understand?"

He laughed gently with the words.

"Yes," said Jeannette.

And again she spoke with that business-like brevity of hers, unsmiling, yet with no hint of disgust. When once she had decided upon a certain course, she was far too shrewd to handicap herself with backward glances. She had always known that she would find any sort of acquaintance with this man revolting. But she meant to make use of him since her need was great. She had made her decision with her eyes open, and she certainly would not flinch now.

"Sit down again!" said Otto Paul kindly. "I think we shall get on very well together. I admire you very much, Miss Wyngold. I always have done so. And I think that with a little training you will make a hit."

"I am prepared to try," said Jeannette.

"Good! Excellent!" said Otto Paul. "By the way, have you yet seen 'The Brain Wave'?"

"No," said Jeannette.

"You shall see it to-night—from the manager's box. You will give me the pleasure of dining with me first. No doubt you have heard that Otto's girls are the prettiest in London. You shall judge for yourself."

A slight tremor went through Jeannette. For one second she wondered if she could possibly endure to be included in this galaxy. But she sternly banished the misgiving. At least she would wait and see the nature of the feast to which she had been invited to contribute. If she found it impossible, she would still be in a position to withdraw, but it should not be on account of any false pride. After all, she had only herself to consider and —no name to keep unsullied.

But this started another thought. She spoke with quiet decision.

"Thank you, Mr. Paul. I appreciate your kindness. There is one thing I wish to say however. If you think

fit to make me an offer which I find myself able to accept in any capacity at the theatre, I wish to take another name."

"I think that would be a vast pity," said Otto Paul. "Your name would be an added attraction."

"But not one of which I should care to avail myself," said Jeannette firmly.

He smiled at her with great amiability. "I do not press the point, Miss Wyngold. You are a queen in your own right, and you will make your mark in any circumstances, for you possess the rare combination of beauty, charm, and intelligence which will carry you anywhere."

"Will you tell me what exactly it is that you have in view for me?" said Jeannette.

"I will—with pleasure." With obliging alacrity he made reply. "You will play a part which I propose to create for you—a part in which there will be action only, no words—a symbolic part, my dear Miss Wyngold, which will reveal to the public something which I do not think they yet realize. It is the part of a goddess who comes down from her temple, clothed with a splendour and a radiance beyond all dreams. And the splendour is withdrawn, the radiance vanishes, but—the wonder remains. She is left among her worshippers—a woman, the most marvellous being in the world, stripped of all romance, and yet romance incarnate. Do you catch the idea? I want an effect that will set the hearts of the audience on fire. You can do it. You have the poise. The marvel of your eyes will draw them. Has anyone ever told you that your eyes are marvellous—marvellous? The mystery of them, it is like a dream, magnetic, haunting. Ah yes! I can make of you a wonder-picture which no one will ever forget. A queen in her own right, did I say? You will be a goddess, and all London shall rave about you."

His soft voice sank to a whisper. He lay heavily in his chair as if exhausted by the sheer delight of the vision he had conjured up.

A faint flush had risen in Jeannette's resolutely composed face. But fulsome as she found his flattery, she was determined that she would not defeat her own ends by showing it. Something would have to be endured whichever way she turned. The only course to pursue was to maintain a rigidly impersonal attitude.

"I hope you will not expect too much of me," she said, after a brief silence.

The half-closed eyes glinted. "I shall expect no more of you than what I know you will with ease perform," said Otto Paul.

He raised himself as though her remark had awakened him, and stretched his arm across his table for an ash-tray.

Two seconds later the door slid open, and the scared face of the page reappeared. "The gent you was expecting is waiting, sir," he announced, and vanished again as if pulled back by a spring.

Otto Paul turned his most expansive smile upon his visitor. "I am sorry to have to cut this most delightful interview short, Miss Wyngold," he said. "If I consulted my own inclinations, I could sit and watch you for hours—just as one sits before a beautiful picture, continually discovering fresh charms, feeding the æsthetic sense. But I have, alas, other calls upon my time. You will give me the pleasure of your company then this evening. Will you meet me at the Savoy at seven? That will fit in admirably. Good-bye!"

His nerveless hand met hers again, but this time he made no pretence of rising from his chair. There was something of the sultan in his attitude, dismissing a favoured slave. Jeannette accepted it with set teeth.

But down in the bleak greyness of the December street, as she walked rapidly away, she uttered a remark which, though philosophical, gave some vent to her feelings and did her good.

"Some of the stepping-stones are sure to be filthy, but one can always change one's shoes when one gets there!"

That she would ultimately get there was—characteristically—beyond all doubt.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MAID OF HONOUR

She had found a lodging over a little baker's shop in a side-street not very far from The Caravan Theatre. It consisted of a bed-sittingroom of minute proportions, and meals could be obtained at a cheap restaurant close by. Its cleanliness and its cheapness had appealed to Jeannette, who told herself stoutly that really that was all that mattered. She had a little money, that which she had earned during her month with the Kingswolds, and she would earn more—much more, if Otto Paul were to be taken seriously—before that was spent.

On the whole she was not down-hearted. It was an immense relief to have escaped from the Kingswold household. Now that she had definitely left it behind, she realized how thoroughly she had hated it. She had never been in tune with her surroundings there, she had felt stagnant, imprisoned; and now she was free. She had broken away from that paralysing atmosphere, and now she would forget all her troubles in work.

As for Otto Paul, well, he was just an unpleasant factor that would have to be endured as stoically as possible. She was not in the least afraid of him, nor did the idea of going on the stage dismay her. She could always stop if she didn't like it. Very full of courage and superbly

self-reliant was Jeannette in those days. She had ruled supreme once by force of circumstance; now circumstance was against her, but she would hold her own in spite of it.

She donned a perfectly plain French dinner-frock of black velvet that evening, one of the two which she had permitted herself to keep after the ruthless cutting-down of her wardrobe. She dressed her hair with the utmost simplicity. She wore no ornaments of any kind. And she knew, without looking, that she was exquisite.

She took a taxi to the Savoy since she was not paying for her dinner, and she entered the vestibule with the absolute self-possession with which her hostess days had endowed her. She imagined that she would not be kept waiting. And she was right. Otto Paul came forward immediately to greet her, and behind him two men at sight of whom Jeannette's straight brows became slightly arched.

For the third time that day his hand, which felt boneless like a frog and clammily warm, clasped hers, and a little shudder went through Jeannette.

"Ah! You are cold!" he said solicitously, and drew her forward.

She freed herself with a brief conventional smile. His gaze dwelt upon her with a horrible sort of gluttony, satiating itself with the flower-like purity of her skin against the sombreness of her attire, as she slipped the cloak from her shoulders. She almost felt inclined to put it on again, but it was whisked from her grasp by a dexterous waiter.

"May I introduce my friends?" said Otto Paul.

She turned her attention to them again, and suppressed another shiver.

"Mr. Ritter!" said Otto Paul ceremoniously. "Mr. Morgenthal! Miss Wyngold!"

Jeannette bowed, securely withdrawn behind her fence of composure. She disliked them both at sight. But what of that? They too were probably stepping-stones.

Their nationality was almost aggressively obvious, widely differing as to type though they were. The first, Ritter, was an alert young man with a large nose and quick dark eyes of great brilliance. He laughed in her face familiarly as he acknowledged the introduction. His companion was considerably older. He looked at Jeannette with an expression which was as nearly a leer as the occasion permitted. His face and his eyes were the colour of mud, but under his iron-grey moustache were extraordinarily full red lips, the lower of which in especial gleamed with the rosy scarlet of a lobster shell. His hair had receded so that it clothed only the back of his head, and his forehead looked stupendously high.

"This is a great pleasure," he said in a rasping voice that had a quite indefinable foreign tang about it. "I knew your father, Miss Wyngold, very well."

The words took her unawares. She caught her breath, almost as if she suppressed a cry.

To her surprise and annoyance Ritter rushed to the rescue before she had time to recover herself.

"Miss Wyngold, I should like to assure you of our deepest sympathy and warmest regard," he said. "It is a very great pleasure to meet you, and I look forward to being associated with you in my work at the theatre in the near future."

He evidently expected some expression of gratification from her in return, but Jeannette completely failed him. She looked at him, at his long black hair sleeked back with much oil, his semiwhiskers and loose, mobile mouth, and her look, though reticent, was conspicuously lacking in responsiveness or appreciation.

"Come! Come!" said Otto Paul banteringly. "Don't

let us waste time in preliminaries! There is an excellent dinner awaiting us. Let us go and enjoy it!"

Jeannette decided very speedily a few minutes later that Otto's method of enjoying his dinner did not bear inspection. She found it positively abhorrent. Of the other two she avoided Morgenthal's look with determination because it offended her, and barely glanced at Ritter lest he should again seek to set her at her ease with him.

She talked generalities with admirable ease to them all, but she kept her eyes downcast. Her expression was never disdainful, but it was very cold.

"Come and sit out with me somewhere!" Ritter said to her suddenly towards the end of the meal. "These two will go on for ever."

"I understood we were going to the theatre," said Jeannette.

"Oh yes, some time. But we can't sit it through. Middle of the second act is time enough."

"As you like," said Jeannette, with a faint smile that held more of patience than he knew.

"Come on then!" said Ritter. "Otto, we're going out to breathe!"

Otto Paul smiled his broad, urbane smile. He was eating largely of a dish of cooked chestnuts which had been specially prepared for him.

"My dear fellow, by all means! We shall be with you in five minutes," he said.

Jeannette rose with relief. Certainly Ritter seemed for the moment the least unpleasant of the trio. She passed down the long diningroom with a stateliness that was very far from betraying her real feelings. It had been an even greater trial than she had anticipated. But still she would not despair. There was too much at stake to permit of discouragement at this stage.

There were a good many people in the great lounge, and she quickened her steps, looking neither to right nor left. Ritter suggested a secluded corner, and she also desired one, but for a reason very different from his. She made her way towards a settee which was partially screened by a palm. Ritter lingered for a moment to order coffee from a passing waiter, but she did not wait for him. She was desperately assailed by a wild longing to escape ere someone in the smart throng recognized her.

As she neared the palm, a voice reached her—a breathless, eager voice, calling, "Jeannette! Jeannette!"—and she stopped dead as if a barrier had suddenly been thrust across her path.

It was a voice from the past, that wonderful past of happiness, success, and golden hopes that could never be hers again.

"Jeannette! Oh, Jeannette!"

A childish figure came fluttering to her as she turned. A face of pale innocence, with eyes like stars, looked adoringly up to hers.

"How lovely to see you again!" gasped the little maid of honour. "Are you well, darling? And oh, how beautiful you look!"

The words came almost with awe, for sorrow had done for Jeannette what happiness had never accomplished. It had given her that look of understanding, of womanhood, of spiritual strength and endurance, developing and enhancing her charm. What Otto Paul had sensed as an indescribable attraction apart from beauty shone with the splendour of the cut diamond in the eyes of little Valerie. The tears started as she looked at her.

"You are more wonderful than ever," she murmured with loving sincerity. "But oh, Jeannette——"

Jeannette broke briskly in upon her. "My dear, this is a very great surprise. What are you doing here?"

She held Valerie's hands in a warm, restraining hold. Valerie's tears must be checked at all costs.

And then she became aware of someone sauntering up behind Valerie, and over the girl's head she met the smiling, half-impudent eyes of Skittles.

"Hey, presto! Here we are again!" he remarked with his customary coolness. "The curtain rises—well-known hotel in London—all the characters as before! Have you seen anything of Buck lately?"

She hated him for his deliberately impersonal attitude, all the more because she knew that he meant it kindly. What right had Skittles to be kind? Did he actually presume to pity her? The old hot resentment rose within her.

She turned from him to little Valerie. "But what are you doing here?" she repeated.

Valerie made a slight gesture that was half-shy, half-pleading. "Tell her, Skittles!" she said.

"Tell her yourself!" said Skittles.

Jeannette knew in a moment. "You are married!" she said.

"To-day!" whispered Valerie in great confusion.

"My darling!" said Jeannette. And all onlookers, possible acquaintances, Skittles the nonchalant, Ritter the impossible, vanished from her consciousness, as she took the trembling girl in her arms and tenderly kissed her. "God bless you!" she said softly. "God bless you, darling!"

"Oh, thank you!" breathed Valerie, clinging to her. "I am so frightfully happy, Jeannette. I so wanted you to be there, but now I've seen you it's all right."

Jeannette stretched a hand beyond her to Skittles. "I congratulate you with all my heart," she said, and the

steely grey of her eyes was for the moment softened to mistiness. "Take great care of her, Skittles!"

"Cherish! That's the word!" said Skittles as his hand gripped hers. "Jolly old word—that! Thanks, Jeannette! Yes, I'll cherish her all right."

He still spoke with the utmost *sang-froid,* but she divined a certain embarrassment beneath it, and beneath that something deeper still. Skittles on his wedding-night was more human than she had ever before seen him.

She released Valerie with a smile into the shy childish eyes. "I shall never forget you," she said.

Valerie clung for a moment longer. "Nor I you!" she whispered. "Oh, Jeannette, if you would only marry Buck—just think—we'd—we'd be sisters!"

Jeannette stifled a queer pang at her heart. The loving words went near to upsetting her composure. She commanded herself with an effort, but she could not answer them.

Ritter was standing behind her, obtrusively self-effacing. She disengaged herself from Valerie.

"Good-bye!" she said. "When do you sail?"

"To-morrow," said Skittles. "We go to Paris for a bit of a spree first, and join the boat at Marseilles."

"I wish you good luck," said Jeannette, "and every happiness."

"Can't I see you to-morrow?" pleaded Valerie. "Are you staying here?"

Jeannette shook her head. "No. I am only here to-night—on business." She spoke the last words with great distinctness. "Good-bye! Good-bye, Skittles!"

His hand grasped hers again. She knew by the way he avoided looking at Ritter that he had seen him and had summed him up.

"Good luck to you, Jeannette!" he said. "And the best chap in the world to share it with you!"

She could not punish him for his presumption. He had always been a difficult person to punish. She could only pretend she did not hear.

With a last smile for the little bride she turned away, and joined the waiting Ritter,

Valerie, with a wistful backward glance over her shoulder, went with her husband in the opposite direction.

## CHAPTER III

### MORGENTHAL

JEANNETTE and Ritter sat under the palm and drank coffee together. She would fain have lost herself in thought, but he would have none of it. He talked incessantly, and she found herself compelled to attend.

He was plainly something of a genius in his own estimation, and she thought it possible that there were a good many who from a financial standpoint might endorse his opinion. It was his *métier* to discover and develop "talent" on the stage of The Caravan Theatre. He brought all the ardour and the self-satisfaction of youth to his task, and his faith in himself was unbounded.

"I can make a great success of you, Miss Wyngold," he said, "if you will place yourself in my hands and let me mould you exactly as I wish."

It was not an enchanting prospect, but she did not turn him from it on that account. Almost in spite of herself, she was interested by reason of his enthusiasm, inferior, if not sordid, as she felt his ideals to be.

"I can supply all that you need," he told her, with great earnestness. "I can show you exactly how to catch the crowd. My gift is grip. I can see beforehand just the effect that will be produced. It is a rare attribute, and Otto knows how to value it."

Jeannette suspected that Otto was fully capable of pricing most things of a marketable value, but she did

not say so. She merely listened to his boastings, and gathered therefrom her own ideas of the new world that she was about to enter.

He startled her once and almost angered her by telling her that she would have to relinquish all ridiculous ideas of caste. But she banished her resentment immediately, for, after all, what had she to be proud of?

She could not resist a return thrust, however. "I suppose you mean that reputations are at a discount on the boards of The Caravan?" she said.

"No, no! I did not put it like that!" protested Ritter. "Only we must have complete freedom of action if we are to achieve success. I mean, there must be no silly scruples of any sort. You don't look the sort of girl to be squeamish, and I may as well tell you beforehand that that sort of thing simply doesn't go down with Otto, while as for Morgenthal,—well, he won't stand any airs from a woman, so it's as well to keep on his right side from the outset. He needs a bit of humouring. You know what I mean."

She caught the quiver of his eyelid and looked beyond it with freezing unresponsiveness. The man in question and their host were just making their way towards them. Morgenthal reeled very slightly as he walked, and she heard Ritter chuckle.

"He'll get over that," he murmured. "In another hour he'll be good company, while poor old Otto will be asleep."

Otto indeed seemed to be in a more or less comatose condition already. He sat down heavily and drank coffee and liqueur, while Morgenthal drank liqueur alone. Conversation languished, for Jeannette was long past the stage of attempting to talk generalities, and Ritter was the only other member of the party capable of talking at all. Morgenthal was obviously trying to focus his

mind which was momentarily somewhat confused. His eyes sought Jeannette, and having found her, fixed her with a wide, insulting stare. Now and then he smacked his lips, but he said nothing, except to call churlishly for another liqueur.

When he had drunk this, he took his eyes off Jeannette and seemed to recover his mental equilibrium.

"What about the theatre?" he said, in a tone of surly enquiry.

Otto Paul came out of his torpor. "Quite so, my dear fellow, quite so. We will go. Ritter, will you order a taxi while I pay the bill?"

Jeannette got up with Ritter, and went in search of her cloak. Alone for a moment, she asked herself if she could possibly continue the horrible adventure, but very sharply she summoned her native grit and went forth again clad in a mail of impenetrable reserve.

They squeezed into the taxi, Otto's mountainous bulk unavoidably crushing her on one side, and Morgenthal deliberately crowding her in front. It was not in Jeannette's nature to be easily overwhelmed, but there was something about this man that sickened her. His spirit-laden breath filled the taxi, revolting her almost beyond endurance. Ritter's business-like egoism was almost welcome by contrast. In fact, but for Ritter's presence, she felt she must have opened the door and fled.

They reached the theatre, and she drew in the night-air with relief, as one just delivered from some noisome den. They went straight through to the manager's box; but she found when she reached it that she and Ritter were alone. The other two had lingered for further refreshment.

The performance was in full swing. She tried to interest herself in it, but her attention would wander. She listened with a nervous dread such as

she had never before experienced for the coming of Morgenthal.

When he and Otto at length rejoined them, he had reached the stage of deadly sobriety which often characterizes an advanced stage of intoxication. He sat down behind her, his arm on the back of her chair, his face close to her shoulder, while Otto took the place beside her, and Ritter sat beyond. She was a prisoner, and her horror of her gaoler grew with every moment that passed. She leaned forward with her arms upon the cushioned front of the hox, keeping as far from him as possible, feeling her flesh creep with disgust at his proximity. Her eyes were resolutely fixed upon the stage where the usual babel of sound and colour were in progress, but her brain scarcely registered anything that she saw. She felt as if a loathsome reptile were creeping upon her in the semi-darkness. She thought that if he touched her, she would fling herself over the edge of the box.

But the act ended, the lights went up, and she realized that he had not moved.

Otto turned in a dull, somnolent fashion and asked her opinion of what she had seen. She knew that her reply was somewhat incoherent, but to her relief he did not seem to notice. Then there was a quiet movement behind her, and she turned, startled, to see Morgenthal going out into the red-lined corridor for another drink. His eyes met hers as he closed the door, and he smiled at her in a way that chilled her blood.

During the whole of the interval she was listening for his return. It was quite useless to tell herself that she was disquieting herself for no reason. It was beyond all reason, this clamouring instinct that warned her so insistently of danger. Somehow it was greater and infinitely more convincing than reason.

The lights were down and the curtain up on the second

act before he came back. He came in without sound, and she felt his hot breath upon her as he sat down. A moment later something just touched the back of her neck —something warm and horrible. Could it have been his lips? She uttered a gasp that was almost a cry.

"I have brought you some cigarettes," said Morgenthal.

She had half-risen, but sharply she collected herself and sat down again. She drew her chair partially round as she did so, so that her back was no longer entirely turned to him.

"Thank you," she said. "I don't care to smoke."

He dropped a packet into her lap. "You may as well have them," he said. "You may change your mind later."

She froze at the familiarity of speech and action. Without another word she picked up the packet and very deliberately dropped it on the floor.

Morgenthal gave a slight start, but he said nothing.

Jeannette turned her attention to the stage. Somehow the episode had helped her. It was easier to combat the man openly than to sit and wait in dread of she knew not what.

He made no further advance of any sort, and she congratulated herself upon having successfully checked his unpleasant attentions at the outset. Otto Paul, breathing stertorously, had sunk into the happy oblivion of repletion. Ritter occasionally leaned across him as though he had been a piece of furniture and gave her some rapid, whispered comment or explanation regarding the action on the stage.

Gradually, but always with the horrid consciousness of Morgenthal in the background, her interest in the revue began to awaken. Ritter had the gift of projecting his own views upon the imaginations of others with a

vividness that made them highly entertaining. As he himself would have expressed it, it was the form his genius took. At the end of the second act Jeannette's quick brain had grasped a good many points which were quite novel to her, and Ritter's eyes looked upon her with keen approval. He managed partly to push and partly to persuade Otto into his corner during the interval, and came and sat beside her for the last act.

But for Morgenthal's presence, Jeannette could almost have enjoyed it, but at this juncture he suddenly developed the alertness which Ritter had predicted, and without ceremony or attempt at any form of courtesy joined in their conversation. It was impossible to frustrate him, Jeannette found; for he was impervious to all hints, and in the end she was more or less compelled to accept his society as inevitable. She realized, however, with relief that the amorous mood that had so revolted her had passed. Either he suspected that he had made a mistake, or he had forgotten it; she hoped the latter. She herself made a genuine effort to put it out of her mind and to concentrate entirely upon the most successful revue of the season. And to a great extent she succeeded, for "The Brain Wave" certainly had more to recommend it than most, and she was quick to see where Ritter found room for improvement.

When the curtain finally fell, she was on the verge of a half-laughing enthusiasm. It was so different from everything she had ever known,—a totally new experience.

Otto Paul roused himself to beam encouragingly upon her. He also smiled at Ritter with an air of jaunty approval, and Jeannette knew that she was marked down as a promising speculation.

"You'll come to the theatre to-morrow," Ritter said to her at parting.

"What time?" said Jeannette.

"I shall be there at ten," said Ritter. "Otto gets in usually about eleven, but come early and I'll show you round!"

She promised, for somehow Fate seemed to have committed her. She had banished Morgenthal resolutely from her calculations. Objectionable he might be, but he was not apparently unmanageable, and she comforted herself with the thought that she would probably see very little of him.

So she parted from Ritter with the undertaking to present herself at the theatre on the following day, and went back to her humble lodging with a most unwonted feeling of elation.

Wherever this new road might lead, it promised her novelty of a most absorbing nature. It was not the glamour of the stage that drew her, but the merciful prospect of being able to forget her troubles in work. It was what she had yearned to do from the very beginning. And this was work moreover, which was not provided by the kindness of friends. Her fallen pride stirred in the dust. Might she not even yet perhaps one day face the world again without reproach?

## CHAPTER IV

### MRS. AMMER

PUNCTUALLY at ten o'clock on the following morning Jeannette reached the stage-door of The Caravan Theatre. It was up a narrow alley of great dinginess, such a place as she had never investigated in the days of her prosperity. An errand-boy, whistling with a piercing shrillness, was the only being within sight. But on reaching the theatre-door she found it open, and a bucket of dirty water with a much-worn scrubbing-brush immersed therein placed straight in the fairway. She avoided this and entered.

Almost immediately a voice accosted her from the dark interior. "Ello, my dear! And what might you be wantin'?"

Jeannette stood still, and a woman in a sacking apron and wearing a man's cap came towards her up the passage. She had the plainest countenance that Jeannette had ever seen, but it was lighted by a pair of blue eyes that fairly shone with good nature.

"Lor!" she said. "It's a wonder you didn't tumble over that there bucket. You see, I wasn't expectin' visitors, not this way I wasn't. Well, my dear, was you lookin' for anybody, 'cos there ain't nobody 'ere. Not at present, that is to say. There's no knowin' but what somebody might turn up later. They often does. But

you've come a bit hearly, my dear. You're not one of Hotto's gals, are you? Not a regular, I mean?"

She peered at Jeannette with a puzzled air, as if there were about her something different from anything she had ever seen before—at least among the legions of "Hotto's gals."

"Perhaps I am early," Jeannette said. "I have come to meet Mr. Ritter."

"Ho! 'Im! Charlie, is it? Well, I daresay he won't be long." The blue eyes still peered at her curiously. "P'raps you'd like to go and sit down in the theayter Do you know your way?"

"No. I've never been in this way before," said Jeannette.

"Ah! I thought you was new. Now come along and I'll show you! I've worked 'ere meself for nigh on twelve year, so I ought to know a little about it. A deal of comin' and goin' I've seen too. But there ain't no place of amusement in London what's got cleaner back places than mine. And it's none so easy neither when them plaguey scene-shifters are about. The mess and muddle as they make you'd 'ardly believe. M'usband often says to me when I goes 'ome tired, 'Whatever do you stick it for, you silly woman?' 'e says. 'The children are out at work, and I does a bit meself now and then. There ain't no call for you to work,' 'e says. But I always answers 'im back just like as if 'e was anybody else, 'Oh, stop your jaw!' I says. 'It's life to me. If I was to leave off goin' to that old theayter, why, I'd be a hold woman at once,' I says. And it's life too, my dear, but it ain't a very good one for the likes of you. You're new to this, or I'm very much mistook."

She was leading the way while she was speaking along a bare corridor with the doors of dressingrooms on both sides. They came to a further door propped open by

a broom which led on to the stage itself. The place was in semi-darkness and eerily quiet. Jeannette looked about her with interest.

The great asbestos safety-curtain was down.

"There's been an 'itch about that," said her guide. "That's why the place is in such a muck. 'Tain't no use my tidyin' up till them fellers 'ave been along to put it right. P'raps you'd like to come round an set in the stalls. I'm a-clearin' up the litter there now, but just went along the passage to fetch me duster. This way, my dear! 'Tain't very tidy yet, but it'll be all right when I've done with it."

They crossed the stage to another door propped open by a dust-pan. It was evident that a free passage throughout the zone of cleaning operations was considered necessary, and a lively draught blew through the building.

Jeannette shivered a little, but made no complaint. Still following her garrulous guide, she entered the auditorium and found herself in a dark and lonely emptiness.

"You sit down in one of them stalls!" advised her friend. "They're quite comfortable to take a rest in. I often sets down meself after me scrubbin's done. You 'as to rest your legs a bit, you know, when you gets on in life. M'usband's the same. 'If you sets down enough,' 'e says, 'you'll never need to lay up.' I don't 'old too much with that of course," with a good-natured chuckle at the obvious witticism of the axiom, "but there's somethink to be said for everythink. It's moderation, I says, moderation that makes hold bones. Nor you don't get that in the theayter, my dear, and that's true speakin'. I wouldn't let no gal of mine go in for it, no, that I wouldn't. No, I tells 'em they're to go to service and work honest. None of your powderin's and paintin's and young toffs waitin' at the stage-door for them. I'd

give 'em the broom-'andle if they was to think of such a thing. And you'll think twice yourself, my dear, if you takes my advice. I ain't got nothink against Charlie Ritter, and I admit as 'e's the brains of this 'ere show. But 'e ain't in command, and 'e's 'appy go easy too. I wouldn't trust 'im. I wouldn't trust any of 'em."

She shook her head darkly and began with great vigour to rub the polished wood at the back of the stalls with her duster.

"I suppose there are always risks of some sort to be taken," remarked Jeannette, beginning to realize after a brief pause that something was expected of her.

"Ah! And that's true speakin' too." The polishing ceased at once. "But there's risks *hand* risks, and if you comes 'ere regular you'll see what I mean. Don't you do it, my dear! You'd much better go into service. Now there's my Halice 'as been in 'er place for ten year and just comin' out to get married. She don't really want to neither, only 'er young man 'e's got impatient-like after six years walkin' out. They don't know when they're lucky, I says. They'll never be so 'appy again. But there! That's what comes of bein' young."

This diverted Jeannette. She found herself laughing in the darkness. "Yes, but they can't stay young," she protested. "And you wouldn't want them to be walking out all their lives!"

"Ah! You're young too, my dear. But you wait! And whatever you do, don't do nothink in a nurry! And don't you get losin' your 'eart to Charlie, neither! For 'e ain't the marryin' sort. 'E's much too hintelligent for that."

"I hope I'm too intelligent for that too," remarked Jeannette.

"I 'ope as you are, my dear. And don't you 'ave no

truck with that there Mr. Morgenthal neither, for 'e's a bad one, and I don't care if I says it to 'is face. 'E's a dirty 'ound, that's what 'e is."

"Exactly what I should have called him myself," said Jeannette, with an almost involuntary glance upwards towards the manager's box that loomed dimly above her. "But what do you know about him, I wonder?"

"I knows more than I can rightly speak of to a young lady like yourself." Very promptly came the answer. "And I'll tell you this much. If 'e was to come along and say to me, 'Mrs. Ammer, it's a cold morning; will you come along and 'ave a drop?' I'd feel meself hinsulted. Not but what a drop in moderation ain't quite a good thing to 'ave, but it ud be poison in that company. So you be warned, my dear! You give 'im the other shoulder hevery time!"

"I will Mrs. Hammer," said Jeannette with decision.

"That's right, my dear. And me name is Ammer hif you please. A plain woman with a plain name, that's what I am. But I 'ope as 'ow I'm honest. I do me best to be. Oh! There comes that young feller to see to the curting," as footsteps sounded from the direction of the stage. "I'll just get finished 'ere, then I'll be ready to go and clean up after 'im. You make yourself at 'ome, my dear! And don't you go and forget what I've been sayin'! And never do nothink in a nurry!"

"Thank you. I won't forget," said Jeannette.

The conversation was here closed, for Mrs. Ammer bent herself with much energy to her task, and it was evident that she could not spare attention for anything besides.

Jeannette sat on in her stall, listening vaguely to hammering behind the curtain and wondering what the day would bring forth. It was intensely cold, and the wind fairly whistled through the place.

She was contemplating a brisk promenade round the theatre when there suddenly came to her the consciousness of someone behind her. She turned swiftly in her chair, and in a moment was on her feet.

"Don't get up!" said Morgenthal, "I have just come for a quiet talk. Ritter is with Otto and will be here shortly. I will come and sit beside you if I may."

He stepped over the back of the fauteuil next to her with the words and laid his hand upon her arm pressing her back into her seat.

Jeannette freed herself with a haughtiness there was no disguising. She sat down, however, since without an open breach she could do no less.

"That is good," said Morgenthal, as he took his seat beside her. 'Now shall we come to business, Miss Wyngold? I understand that you are hoping to get an engagement here. Has Mr. Otto Paul made any definite proposal to you yet?"

"No," said Jeannette.

She was relieved by his business-like tone. He seemed completely to have forgotten his unpleasant behaviour of the previous night, and Jeannette decided at once to do her best to forget it also.

"Of course," said Morgenthal smoothly, "being entirely a beginner, you could not expect a very handsome salary at present. You have got to be taught your job, have you not? I am sure you will be the first to realize that."

"I want enough to live on," said Jeannette practically.

"Oh, quite, quite!" He made an ample gesture. "But just at first of course we cannot offer you very much. It is in fact contrary to our custom to pay anything at all to a girl during the first weeks of her training."

"In that case," said Jeannette very firmly, "I must look for work elsewhere."

"Not at all! Not at all! We—that is, Mr. Paul and myself—are prepared to make an exception in your favour." The red lips parted in a smile which Jeannette found abhorrent. "It rests with you, Miss Wyngold, to justify our generosity. We have in fact decided to offer you fifteen shillings a week for the first three months, after which we will consider the possibility of a rise. If you agree to this, I will prepare a contract for you to sign."

"I don't agree," said Jeannette quietly.

"You do not?" He looked at her in surprise.

"It is not enough to live on," said Jeannette.

"But, my dear young lady," he spoke still with that horrible smile, "you must realize that work at the theatre will certainly not occupy your full time. You can very easily augment your income by other means."

"By what means?" said Jeannette.

He lifted his shoulders. "That is not for me to say. But I assure you these are most generous terms for a beginner."

"I can't accept them," said Jeannette.

She spoke briefly, but her heart felt cold within her. She had not anticipated this.

"Perhaps you would like to think it over," suggested Morgenthal suavely.

"No, thank you," said Jeannette.

He leaned towards her. His eyes with their sinister smile looked full into hers. "My dear Miss Wyngold," he said, "may I offer you a word of advice?"

She stiffened at his closer proximity, but said nothing.

"It is this," he said, in a purring undertone; "the gods are generally lavish to young ladies possessing such charm as yours. By accepting these terms you are securing for yourself practically boundless opportunities. You do not realize this, but I assure you it is so. Give it a

trial, Miss Wyngold, and I think you will find it worth your while."

"I don't understand you," Jeannette said. "It seems to me that I should do better—far better—if I went out as a housemaid. And I am not at all sure," she spoke deliberately, her eyes, coldly combative, meeting his, "that I should not prefer it."

Morgenthal sat back in horror. "My dear Miss Wyngold, you!" he ejaculated. Then in a moment, patting her arm, "Come, come, that is not a feasible suggestion. We must think of something better than that for you. Shall we say twenty shillings—in consideration of your previous circumstances? I think perhaps I could persuade Mr. Paul to agree to twenty shillings."

It came to Jeannette then through her despair that they did not want to let her slip through their fingers; therefore she realized that they expected to turn her services to good account. It went through her brain in a flash as she freed her arm from his revolting touch.

Very haughtily she faced him, and very clearly she spoke. "I will agree to twenty shillings as a beginning, but I shall not be satisfied with that for ever, and I am not prepared to bind myself by any contract until I know exactly what is expected of me."

"My dear child!" protested Morgenthal.

Jeannette held up her hand. "Stop, please! I am not a child, and I will not sign away my freedom blindly to anyone. For twenty shillings I will work my hardest, but I will not sign any contract until I know exactly what that contract means."

"But that is ridiculous!" said Morgenthal. He was laughing, but there was an angry note in his laughter. "You are asking far better terms than any girl on this stage ever gets. You have no experience in these matters."

"None," said Jeannette briefly. "But I am not obliged to accept any terms against my will. I am a free agent, and I will keep my freedom."

"That is impossible," said Morgenthal. "It is also quite unreasonable. Now let us suppose for the sake of argument that a very unlikely thing occurred and you were a success. All the managers in London would at once approach you with offers which it would probably be very greatly to your advantage to accept. Now do you think that Mr. Paul is going to take all the risk and expense of training and presenting you in order that—shall we say the manager of The Oasis?—may reap the benefit? I think not, Miss Wyngold." He spoke with studied sarcasm. "Mr. Paul does not owe his own great success to such tactics as those."

It was unanswerable logic, but Jeannette's quick brain was undaunted.

"That of course can be provided against," she said. "I am ready to sign an undertaking not to accept employment from any other manager for three years from the date of my engagement. But I reserve to myself the right to leave the stage if I so desire, just as he will doubtless reserve the right to dismiss me, though in that case of course my first undertaking would be cancelled."

Morgenthal stroked his small black beard for a few seconds in silence. "You evidently inherit your father's business instincts," he said at length, with a hint of malice.

"Or the common instinct for self-preservation," said Jeannette coldly, "combined with an instinct for fair play which is unfortunately not so common."

Morgenthal's red lips formed something which he did not utter. "Well, of course," he said then, "it is not for me to say whether Mr. Paul will be prepared to do business with you on those lines. However, that need

not be discussed now. I will endeavour to explain your point of view to him."

His tone intimated that this was of so extraordinary a nature that he anticipated some difficulty in doing so, but Jeannette wisely refrained from argument. She could not claim to have gained much ground, but she had certainly lost none in the interview. It did not surprise her when her companion rose suddenly, and without a word of farewell left her.

## CHAPTER V

### RITTER

"'As 'e gone?" said Mrs. Ammer. "And a good riddance of very dirty rubbish, says I. You just listen to me, my dear, and don't let yourself be led away by the likes of 'im! I can put you in the way of honest work, if that's what you're wantin', and proud I'd be to do it."

"You are very kind," said Jeannette.

"Not a bit, my dear. I'm always willin' to do what I can for the deservin'," said Mrs. Ammer. "I'm goin' be'ind now to see if I can 'elp that young feller with the curting. 'E ain't been 'ere long and don't know much about it."

She departed again, and Jeannette heard her voice raised in friendly advice on the stage. She smiled to herself despite her forlornness. It was impossible not to like Mrs. Ammer. She wondered how the stage-carpenter appreciated her kindly efforts at assistance. And then Ritter suddenly entered at the side-door, and she forgot them both.

"I say, I'm afraid I'm late," he said. "Quite unavoidable. Couldn't get away from Otto. We'll get to business at once. Come up on the stage, Miss Wyngold! What's happened here?" He frowned. "Safety curtain gone wrong? No good then! We'd better talk

here. I want you to come this afternoon and meet Miss Peach Warner. She's a clever little thing and will design a dress for you."

Jeannette looked at him. "It is more than possible," she said, "that I shall not come to the theatre after all. Didn't Mr. Morgenthal tell you?"

"Oh, rats!" said Ritter. "He was only bluffing. Of course you will come! Otto and I have fixed it all up. You haven't got to do anything, you know, anyhow not the first night. It's a sort of scenic effect we want to work up. You know the sort of thing. I gave you the outlines last night. We are going to make a sort of throne for you, a kind of shrine, with doors in front. There will be a lot of pilgrims and hymnal chorus—Verney must write that. And then at a given moment, the doors will open and you will be revealed to your devotees. We want you just to rise and walk slowly down the steps of the throne, and as you come they will throw a beam on you. You will be wearing a transparent veil, and that will fall away as you lift your hands in blessing. They will see you no more as an unknown goddess, but as a woman—or womanhood shall we say? It will be a sort of allegorical vision—a sort of Queen of the Earth. I think I've got Otto's idea all right. The worship will turn into astonishment, and the astonishment into love. The flowers they have brought for your temple will be showered all over you. There will be a great festal song. Verney is writing that now. And at the end a knight in armour on a white horse will ride in and offer you homage. He will be masked, but you will turn from all the rest to greet him, and he will bear you away. That will be the curtain. You see the idea, don't you? We want to get in that human touch, just to illustrate that one man's love is all that a woman ever really wants. It'll appeal like hot cakes, and it won't be

a bit difficult for a girl like you. You're so tremendously brilliant, so magnetic. We shall make a huge success of it. Think you can be ready by Boxing Day? We'll get in as many rehearsals as possible. Of course you can manage it! I'll put you through."

He paused at last, and Jeannette felt as if a racing engine had suddenly been stopped. She drew an exhausted breath. The whole conception sounded to her absurdly cheap and trite, but the man's enthusiasm had a certain effect upon her. He had made her see his vision.

"You are taking it for granted that I can do it," she said.

"Of course you can do it!" said Ritter. "You're a girl in a thousand. That's why we want to get hold of you. You've got that—what is it?—poise, charm, mystery, that grips the crowd. You've got romance, Miss Wyngold. None of those other girls can see an inch beyond their noses. But you—you've got a look of second sight about you. Your eyes are the eyes of a sorceress. Take this chance and you'll carry all before you! I know what I'm talking about. I'm a judge of these things. I can hit the bull's-eye every time."

Somehow his blatant egotism impressed her so that she did not want to laugh. He was so supremely sure of himself that it seemed almost ridiculous to doubt him. Looking back later, she marvelled that she was so easily carried away, but at the time it appeared natural, even inevitable. The relief after her disheartening conversation with Morgenthal was so great that she was perhaps over-ready to be swept off her feet by Ritter's abounding confidence. When he proposed going behind to show her the stage and how he planned to secure his effects, she went with something of the enthusiasm with which he had inspired her the previous evening.

Ritter saw it, and smiled with vast self-satisfaction. It was another evidence of his gift.

They made their way round to the back of the curtain, with the mechanism of which two men were now struggling. Mrs. Ammer had disappeared from the scene though there were sounds of her pail and scrubbing-brush in the distance. And here Ritter, oblivious of all noise from the workmen, continued his harangue until he had fully satisfied himself that Jeannette saw the whole project through his eyes. His impetuosity was so infectious that finally she was actually drawn into making suggestions, which he hailed with delight, adopting some and discarding others with equal vigour. He had arrived at the stage of entering copious notes in a pocket-book when the efforts of the carpenters met at last with success, and the great asbestos curtain soared solemnly upwards, throwing open the stage to the dark void of the theatre beyond.

"Excellent!" said Ritter. "This will give you an idea of what it feels like. Only there will be light of course —a gradual growing of light to an immense brilliance. Imagine all that space beyond crammed with people—as it was last night! You won't be scared, will you?"

"Scared!" said Jeannette with disdain.

"Excellent!" he said. "Ah! Hilton!" He summoned one of the men from the gloom at the side of the stage. "I've got a few details here for you to take down. It's got to be a quick job; understand? Where's your mate? He'd better come and listen too."

The man addressed came with characteristic leisureliness. His mate remained in a far corner, working at something with a chisel.

"Tell him to come along!" said Ritter impatiently.

The stage-carpenter gave a whistle over his shoulder which elicited no response. He turned to Ritter. "Never

mind him. He's new to the job. He'd be no good."

"What's the use of having a man who's no good?" demanded Ritter.

"Oh, he's all right for work," said the other man contemptuously. "Works like a nigger. It's experience he hasn't got."

"He does the work and you supply the experience, eh?" said Ritter.

"Well, you see, he's young at present," said the stage-carpenter, wholly failing to notice the barb.

"Yes, yes, he'll get over it no doubt," said Ritter.

And Jeannette laughed, aloud and irresistible, in the semi-darkness so that the despised young man in the corner ceased his chiselling to listen. He resumed it very quickly, however, and as swiftly passed from her mind.

A little later Ritter walked with her through the devious passage that led to the stage door. He was full of nervous energy and enthusiasm.

"You're wonderful! You're It!" he said at parting. "No wonder Otto thought he'd got a find! Good-bye for the present! Don't forget to turn up again this afternoon! And look here!" they were nearing the stage-door; he lowered his voice impressively. "You put yourself in my hands—unreservedly, mind!—and I'll lift you on to the very crest of the wave!"

"Mind 'ow you go, my dear!" said Mrs. Ammer from her knees beside the step. "It's a bit slippery just 'ere."

"Oh, dash that old woman!" said Ritter. "She's always cropping up."

"Some people do," said Jeannette.

But she was not thinking of Mrs. Ammer as she walked away down the grey street, nor yet of the amazing Ritter. Someone else, an unbidden guest, had entered her mind with those words by some means

inexplicable to her. She had shaken him off at last. She had sent him away. Yet she could not cast him wholly from her thoughts. Would he ever crop up again? Would he? Would he?

"Of course he won't!" said Jeannette with decision.

But in her heart—she wondered!

## CHAPTER VI

### CHRISTMAS EVE

THE days that succeeded that morning at The Caravan Theatre were such a jumble of rapid and fevered experiences that Jeannette, in the midst of the whirl, found it difficult to register any very lasting impressions. A few, indeed, stood out like rocks in a turbulent sea, but even these were sometimes submerged in the general uproar. When she slept, which was not often or for long, it was with wild dreams of success and disaster strangely and terribly mingled. She met and became to a certain extent merged among Otto's girls, and suppressed the dislike she felt for most of them with her usual business-like resolution. They were merely, as it were, the frothy spaces between the stepping-stones that she was so valiantly determined to cross. One alone of them really stood out from the rest as worthy of consideration, and this was poor little Miss Peach Warner, who was pale and worn almost to tragedy by day, and vividly, sparklingly, artificially renewed by night. With this girl Jeannette could have found it in her heart to be friendly, but somehow, tacitly, Peach made it obvious that she had no desire for any but the briefest intercourse. She discussed and designed Jeannette's theatrical dress, with occasional impetuous interferences from Ritter, who was continu-

ally on the spot and not seldom, in Jeannette's opinion, in the way.

Miss Warner never offered any opposition to his headlong suggestions. She would alter hours of work without demur in spite of the fact that she herself was appearing in the chorus every night. "That smart little Peach" was Ritter's customary name for her, but it never moved her either to gratification or annoyance. And to Jeannette she remained an enigma throughout those days of preparation.

Meanwhile she rehearsed each morning under Ritter's keen guidance, and she did not need his enthusiastic assurances to convince her that she shaped well. She worked hard and patiently, taking everything in good part, keeping her eyes as ever firmly fixed upon her goal. She meant to be a success and in her heart she had a wholly unaccountable conviction that she would be.

Of Morgenthal during those days she saw nothing, and she concluded that the question of the contract was still in abeyance. It also seemed that the question of salary was sharing the same fate, but though her funds were dwindling with a swiftness that alarmed her whenever she had time to think, she determined to shelve the matter until after Boxing Day. When she had made her first appearance and had proved her right to payment they could not in justice withhold it.

The one part of her performance for which she could not even pretend any enthusiasm was the episode of the knight in armour. Ritter's first ecstatic vision had been modified, somewhat to her relief, and the knight came on without his horse; but since all that was required of him was to be able to move in armour, the part was rehearsed by various people of the super type which in Jeannette's estimation deprived it completely of any artistic value.

"Of course anyone can play this part," said the omnipotent Ritter when she ventured to protest. "It doesn't matter two damns, as the audience won't even see his face. He is meant to be a mythical personage, you know, and absolutely subsidiary to you. You're the attraction, and we don't want any side-shows."

She did not agree with him, but she knew the uselessness of argument and said no more.

The chorus which had been specially written for the scene seemed to her exceptionally good, and the whole mounting of it promised to be excellent. Several carpenters were at work behind the scenes, but they were always banished by Ritter during rehearsal, and of Mrs. Ammer she caught only very occasional glimpses as she came or went.

On Christmas Eve Otto Paul himself sat in the stalls and watched the last rehearsal. It was the only full dress rehearsal that had been held, and Jeannette anticipated it with a nervousness which even she found it difficult to suppress. But when the time came and she mounted into her shrine behind the glaring golden doors, it passed completely from her. She awaited her turn with absolute calm, and when it came she played her part to perfection. Ritter had trained her well. His gift had served him in good stead so far as she was concerned. Her quick brain and her ready receptivity made her an almost faultless medium for the expression of his inspiration. She had the power to place herself completely at his disposal, to sink her own ideas and individuality in complete subservience to his. She held no very high opinion of his artistic conceptions, but she recognized that he was an authority in a sphere which was entirely new to her, and she was far too clever to question his ability which, in his own line, was undoubtedly brilliant.

She did not like the atmosphere in which she found

herself. It was unnatural, exotic, extravagant in a fashion that was totally unfamiliar to her; but also it helped her to put the past behind her as she could hardly have done in any other surroundings. It was her nature to be thorough, and her rôle absorbed her entire attention. Success was her goal, and she was straining every nerve to attain it. She would not contemplate failure. Somehow she was quite sure she would not fail. She was still more sure of this when her performance was ended and the triumphal chorus died away; for Otto Paul came up on the stage to congratulate her with tears in eyes and voice.

"You are divine," he said, and though she despised him for his foolishness she knew that he had some reason for it.

She accepted his homage graciously, but with a certain hauteur. After all, it was her due. She had always known that she possessed the power to make her mark.

But when he led her aside, his arm caressingly through hers, her graciousness began to wane.

"You are excellent, my dear, excellent," said Otto Paul, lisping slightly as his fashion was. "But your dress—your dress—why is it not transparent?"

"Transparent!" said Jeannette bewildered.

He kept her arm in an ingratiating pressure. "We must see the beauty of your form as well as of your face. It will be quite safe, I assure you. I like you in that wonderful sea-green drapery. It is nymph-like, superb. But take out the lining, my dear! Take out the lining!"

Jeannette was disgusted and showed it. She protested with some vehemence, but Otto Paul was softly obdurate. He called for Miss Peach Warner, and drew her on one side, talking in whispers.

Jeannette's anger began to rise. She felt almost tempted to change her dress, and walk straight out of the

theatre. And then Ritter came to her, sleek and reassuring, and she waited to hear what he had to say.

"It's all right," he assured her with the utmost confidence. "Otto is making a storm in a teacup. We don't want anything immodest. As a matter of fact, we are not on that stunt just now. It's a bit played out, you know. You leave it to me, Miss Wyngold! I know exactly how far you care to go. Just change and go home! You shan't be worried, I promise you. I'll show the Peach what to do."

Otto Paul here left his corner and came to her, fatuously friendly. "Ritter is quite right," he said. "He knows what we both want. We will leave it to him, Miss Wyngold. I shall be quite content to do so. It is all a question of suggestion, you know. You can trust Ritter. He will never go too far."

Jeannette turned to Peach, but the girl stood like an automation, pale and unresponsive, in her own gaudy apparel. It was plainly useless to appeal to her.

"I should like to see the dress again before I put it on," she said.

"You shall if it is possible," said Ritter smoothly. "But please leave it entirely to me! It will not need any very serious alteration. Peach and I will very soon have it O. K."

"Good! Good!" said Otto Paul. "Let me see! What is your stage name? Miss Jenny Wyn, is it not? I prophesy a very great success for Miss Jenny Wyn. In fact, I am quite prepared to congratulate her beforehand."

He smiled upon her with unctuous appreciation, and Jeannette knew that the discussion had been gently but firmly closed like the well-oiled door of a safe. She abandoned it therefore, not without reservations, and went away to change.

She wished she could have spoken to Peach alone, but

this was obviously impossible. In the face of Ritter's assurances it seemed that she might be making much ado about nothing, and she decided to leave the matter in abeyance until she was satisfied that she had some cause for complaint.

She was somewhat surprised as she left the theatre to find Mrs. Ammer waiting for her with a hint of stealthiness in her bearing.

"I'm a'goin' your way, my dear, and it's dark. I was wonderin' if I'd just see you 'ome," she said.

It was very dark, Jeannette was touched by the kindness of the action.

"How good of you!" she said. "I am not nervous, but I shall be very pleased to have you with me."

"I likes a bit of company meself sometimes," said Mrs. Ammer. "M'usband 'e always says, 'There's never any 'arm in bein' too careful, specially when you're young.' And I agrees with 'im in the main. I never lets my Halice or my Ilda stay out in the streets after dark without they've got a young man as I can trust to look after 'em, and then it's only to go to the pictures and back. And 'ow are you gettin' on, my dear? Do you like the theayter?"

"It's a little difficult to tell at present," said Jeannette.

"Ah! You're cautious," said Mrs. Ammer. "And I don't blame you either. You've good reason to be," she added darkly, after a moment's thought. "Maybe you've found it out."

"Found out what?" said Jeannette.

"That there's more under the surface than what meets the eye," said Mrs. Ammer. "I've seen it meself many's the time. Now take the case of that young Peach gal! She ain't more than about your own age, you know, and look at 'er! It'd fair break my 'eart if she belonged to me."

"What's the matter with her?" said Jeannette.

Mrs. Ammer made a significant sound between pursed lips. "Tain't for me to say, my dear, and it don't do to know too much. But she used to be the gayest of the lot. A saucy gal she was. And now—well, you can see for yourself what she is now. There's a devil in that theayter, though maybe I didn't ought to say it. There's devils everywhere if you only knows 'ow to find 'em, and they ain't always in sheep's clothin' neither. And what are you goin' to do for Christmas, my dear? 'Ave you got any plans?"

Jeannette had been rigorously striving to expel the very thought of Christmas from her mind, but something in Mrs. Ammer's voice warned her to plead an engagement.

"I have an old friend who wants me," she said, with a loving thought for Lady Varleigh whose last letter had contained a most urgent entreaty that she would change her mind and join her.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Ammer. "I knew as it'd be no use me suggestin' as you should come to us, though I was 'opin' as 'ow you might. For I've took a fancy to you, my dear, and that's the truth. You'd 'ave been right down welcome if you could 'ave come. Still it's better for you to go to your own people, and it don't do to count too much on hanythink. As my pore mother often used to say, 'Man appoints but God disappoints.' And very true it is."

"Oh, how lovely!" said Jeannette, and stopped herself hastily. "I mean how very kind of you to think of such a thing, Mrs. Ammer! Indeed I am most grateful."

"You'll please not mention it, my dear," said Mrs. Ammer. "You'll always be welcome in my 'ome if you should hever care to enter it. We ain't a large party now-

a-days—only my Georgie what's in the police, and a fine upstandin' young feller 'e is too and that there young carpenter chap from the theayter what lodges with us. 'E's a very nice young man, 'e is,—somethink of your own class, I should say. Not a great deal to say for 'isself, 'e 'asn't, but always perlite to a fault. Very good to my little Arriet 'e is too. She's the youngest and, my word, she is a caution. I sometimes think as 'ow she's a bit too pert, but 'er father 'e won't 'ave 'er crossed. And it's 'ard to be strict with the baby, you know." Mrs. Ammer paused to breathe. "Besides, she's a good little gal," she added in a tone that tried to sound impartial. "Mr. Smith —that's the lodger you know—'e's quite took with 'er. You ought to meet 'im, my dear. Or maybe you 'ave at the theayter?"

"No," said Jeannette, who had never even glanced at the man in question.

"Ah! 'E's a bit shy," commented Mrs. Ammer. "'E works 'ard, but 'e never puts 'isself forward, so to speak. Well you come along some day—it's fifty-nine, Jigger Street, 'tain't 'alf a mile away—and I'll manage for you to meet 'im. 'E's just your sort, and a good steady lad too."

"How kind of you, Mrs. Ammer!" said Jeannette.

"Not a bit, my dear, not a bit! I'd like to do you a good turn," said Mrs. Ammer. "You always seems to me to be a bit lonely, and it ain't good for a gal of your age. And 'e's the sort as I'd trust with any of my own gals too. I'd like you two to meet. I really would."

They had reached Jeannette's lodging, somewhat to her relief, for Mrs. Ammer's good intentions were becoming much too pressing. Jeannette held out her hand. "Good-bye!" she said. "And ever so many thanks!"

"Don't mention it, my dear! You've nothink at all to thank me for," said Mrs. Ammer, shaking her hand up

and down with much *empressement*. "And I'm sure I wish you a very merry Christmas!"

"And I wish you the best you have ever had," said Jeannette, and so parted with her.

A merry Christmas! Poor Jeannette!

## CHAPTER VII

### MR. SMITH

YES, it was Christmas—a grey and murky day—and she was quite alone. She had meant to get up early and go to a Communion Service, but when the time came, her heart failed her. She felt as if a great loneliness awaited her outside, and she postponed the facing it as long as possible. This day of utter solitude was to be the longest she had ever spent. Again, a little later, the church-bells pealed, and she tried to bring herself to go; but in the very act of dressing, her desolation came back upon her in a black and overwhelming cloud, and she knew that she lacked the strength.

"God forgive me!" she said. "I can't do it. I shall break down if I do."

Above all things, she desired to keep from this, to guard the wound that was still so fresh from breaking out again. To yield again to her grief was to lose the ground that she had so hardly gained. She had an unspeakable longing to yield, but her dread of the weakness that must inevitably follow held her back.

"I must not," she said. "I must not."

For there was no one to comfort her. Even Buck had taken her at her word at last and gone.

She was very glad that he had. It was far better for them both. But oh, how she yearned for someone—if it were only someone to carp at!—on that dreadful Christmas Day.

Her thoughts kept turning backwards, do what she would. Last Christmas they had been at Starfields. There had been guests—a jolly party. Major Sterne had very nearly proposed to her. She remembered how lightly she had put him off. Little Valerie had come in with her father in the afternoon, and Skittles and Bandy had walked over from the Hall.

Buck—oh, yes, of course Buck had not stayed away, but for some reason he had come later. She could not remember why, but she knew it was something rather stupid and very worthy that had detained him.

Like a dream it all came back before her mental vision, and she could not shake it off. Her father—her own precious father—had come to her in the early morning while she was still in bed, and they had talked together in the old dear way. And then they had gone to church together, and shared a hymn-book, which neither of them needed, to sing the Christmas hymns.

She knew that if the music of one of those hymns were to reach her to-day, she would burst into uncontrollable weeping.

When the bells had ceased, she went out. The streets were quiet, but of those she met everyone seemed to be laughing or happily intent upon some errand. Everyone had somewhere to go, except herself.

She turned back very soon. "How shall I bear it?" she whispered to her grief-laden heart.

Back again in her dreary little room, she made a desperate effort to master her misery. After all, it was only for a few hours. To-morrow she would be busy again and smother her sorrow once more in work. She

tried to fix her thoughts upon the morrow, even to work herself into a state of anxiety regarding it. But she could not. The morrow did not seem to matter any more. Her work at the theatre was vague and unreal. The past had her in its grip.

She went without a mid-day meal that day literally because she forgot it. There was no one to care whether she ate or starved, no one to think of or provide for. The long, long afternoon dragged away. Once the dreary strains of a street-band playing carols reached her, and she went to her bed and hid her face in the pillow to shut out the sounds.

Then she found that she was shivering with cold and slipped inside the blankets for comfort. She did not sleep. Now and then she tried to pray, but each time it ended in a frantic battle with her tears. She was quite alone in the dingy little house, and the creaking emptiness weighed upon her spirit. It became a nightmare fight against the most awful depression she had ever experienced. She knew that she was being borne under, but still she fought. It was almost an obsession now to hold back her tears.

With clenched hands she lay, struggling against her weakness. "I won't! I won't! I won't!" she said, but with each repetition she knew that she was weaker.

Something gave way at last. Some cord of endurance snapped. Very suddenly she knew that she was beaten if she remained in that awful loneliness another second. She arose, white and desperate, put on hat and coat again and went down to the street-door at the side of the shop. A gas-jet was burning dimly in the passage that led to it. Her footsteps echoed forlornly on the oilcloth.

She fumbled at the door and opened it. It was almost dark outside. A cold rain drifted in. But she was only

vaguely aware of it. She moved mechanically, as if under some hypnotic influence. Her one fixed idea at that moment was to get away from the haunting misery that had tortured her so pitilessly all through the day. She went out blindly, shutting the door behind her.

Later, she never remembered taking any direction. It was too dark to matter. There was no one about save at the public-house round the corner which was brilliantly lighted and round the doors of which a noisy group of men was gathered. No one accosted her. She went wraith-like out of one darkness into another.

And then at length after weary wandering that seemed to lead to nowhere, she found herself pausing for no reason that she knew at a crossing lighted by a single lamp-post that flung its glare upon the wall of a house that bore the name-plate of a street. Unconsciously almost she looked up and read it: *Jigger Street.*

It came to Jeannette then, as it comes to many of us at one point or another in life's journey, that there is no such thing as chance. Unknown but very surely, a Power had guided her feet.

She turned up the mean little street and found that she was already on the side of the odd numbers. It consisted of blocks of dingy houses, each with a yard and paling in front. There were lights in a good many windows, and rough laughter and singing came to her fitfully as she passed up the narrow pavement. A few figures loitered here and there in the road, but no one took the faintest interest in her. The numbers of the houses were painted on the fanlights of the doors, and though only here and there were they illuminated she had no difficulty in finding Number Fifty-nine. Again it seemed to her that she was being led.

The gate of Fifty-nine was stuck half-open. Obviously this was its normal attitude. She pushed past it, nar-

rowly avoiding a puddle just inside, and, guided by the welcoming fanlight which here shone like a beacon, mounted the step which led to the shabby door.

The piercing strains of a cheap gramophone reached her from within. A comic song was being declaimed in a throaty recitative. But even that did not turn her back. She had sought the only haven within reach, and she knocked upon the door with nervous energy, intent only upon escaping the darkness and desolation outside.

There was no immediate answer to her knocking, and she knocked again, feverishly, insistently.

The gramophone ceased its noise as she did so, and a man's voice came to her, loud and grumbling.

"Who's this, I wonder? What the devil do they want?"

She drew back sharply, but on the instant another voice reached her—a familiar, kindly voice—and she paused.

"Well, let's go and see, Father! A visitor on Christmas night always brings luck."

Jeannette's lips smiled a twisted smile in the darkness. Could she indeed bring luck to anyone now? She heard feet in the passage. A bolt was pulled back. The door opened.

"Why, goodness gracious unto me!" ejaculated Mrs. Ammer. "It's you, my dear! Who ever would 'ave thought it? Step right in and make yourself at 'ome, and I wish you a very merry Christmas!"

A hard sob suddenly shook Jeannette. She held out a trembling hand. "Thank you! Thank you!" she said. "I—didn't go to my friends after all, and—and——"

"My dearie!" said Mrs. Ammer, and pulled her in heartily. "I were just a-thinkin' of you. We ain't a big party this Christmas, only m'usband and Georgie and my little Arriet, and Mr. Smith the lodger. 'Es out just now, but I'm expectin' 'im in any minute. We were

just 'avin' a bit of a song to cheer us up. Oh! 'Ere *is* Mr. Smith! Come in, Mr. Smith, and shut the door! It's a miserable night. This is Miss Wyn from The Caravan Theayter. She's come to look us up, and very kind indeed it is of 'er. You've seen 'er before no doubt though."

A man clad in an ulster had come up the path behind Jeannette. He took off his cap as he entered, and stopped to rub his feet on a tattered mat on the threshold. Then, with a deliberation that was faintly tinged with embarrassment, he faced the Christmas visitor with hand outstretched.

"Yes. I think I have seen you before," he said.

"You!" said Jeannette with a gasp, and almost fell against the wall in sheer amazement.

"Yes, me!" said Buck, and somehow his hand found hers, though whether he took or she gave she could never afterwards determine. "I hope you don't mind—for once."

Mind! How could she mind the voice of a friend in an alien land? She laughed tremulously, fighting back an insane desire to weep. A multitude of emotions were struggling for the mastery, but paramount amongst them all was a throbbing, burning gladness such as she had never known before. She ought to have been angry with him. Instead, she clung to his sustaining hand.

"Well, I never did!" declared Mrs. Ammer, nonplussed. "So you 'ave met before! Deary me! Well, I am surprised!"

"No, it's my fault," said Buck, taking the burden upon himself in his usual clumsy, kind-hearted way. "Miss Wyn has never seen me working at the theatre. You don't suppose she'd ever look at a mouse in a corner like me? The fact is, we're both up from the country, Mrs.

Ammer. We used to live in the same village. And we've both come to London to seek our fortunes."

"Well, there now!" said Mrs. Ammer. "That's a bit of Providence, that is. And to think of you two a-workin' in the same shop, so to speak, and not knowin'. Well, there, I am surprised."

Jeannette recovered herself sufficiently to remove her hand. She gave Buck a straight look.

"It is rather surprising," she said. "But I suppose we shall get over it. Shall we—may we go in, Mrs. Ammer?"

"My dearie, yes," said Mrs. Ammer. "And be'ave just as if you was in your own 'ome. M'usband 'e's a bit rough, but you mustn't mind 'im. 'E's got a good 'eart."

They went in, and "m'usband," surly with shyness, received them with a nod of welcome and pointed them to a couple of windsor chairs against the wall. Georgie, the young policeman, had just started another record, and they had to sit through a wailing and very nasal reproduction of Tosti's "Good-bye," over which Jeannette, who was not by nature addicted to giggling, had to exercise the utmost self-control to maintain a serious countenance, while Buck, with the nine-year-old Arriet on his knee, frankly laughed aloud.

Mrs. Ammer had the elements of the perfect hostess in her composition, and she managed her small party with a homely skill that moved Jeannette to admiration. The contrast between this and the misery that had preceded it was so intense that she felt almost absurdly light-hearted now that she had escaped. There remained of course Buck to be dealt with, but it was impossible to give his case impartial consideration at present. His behaviour had been extraordinary, but perhaps it was better not to take him too seriously. That ridiculous feeling of gladness persisted in spite of her. So he had not for-

saken her after all! He was still standing by with that fond and foolish faithfulness that she had tried so often to annihilate. And she could not say to herself any more that she wished it had been another. Though it was only Buck, she was glad—she was glad—she was glad!

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CREST OF THE WAVE

Buck walked back with Jeannette, and was strangely content to talk commonplaces. He told her with great simplicity that he had found work at the theatre soon after his arrival in London. It suited him, and so he had stuck to it. He had not anticipated her coming, which tactlessly offered piece of information sent a very decided pang of disappointment through Jeannette. Bandy had gone to South Africa with the avowed intention of making a home for Daphne Somers. Major Sterne and Audrey Wilmot were engaged to be married. Skittles and Valerie were on their way to India.

"Do you know anything about Starfields?" Jeannette asked somewhat abruptly, as they neared the end of their walk.

"It has been bought by an American," said Buck.

She passed quickly on. "And the Hall?"

"Oh, the Hall is now Sir Philip's property," he answered simply. "He offered very kindly to put me in as his agent, but I refused."

"You refused!" said Jeannette.

"I couldn't quite see my way," said Buck.

"Surely it would have suited you better than what you are doing now," she said.

"No," said Buck.

Was it exasperation or was it that absurd gladness again that quickened her heart? She did not know. They had reached their destination, and she turned and offered her hand with finality.

"Good night!"

His fingers closed tightly for a second, and then relaxed. "I suppose I mustn't ask to come in?" he said.

She condemned his conventionality as idiotic, but curiously she welcomed it. "Not now, I think," she said.

"I shall see you to-morrow," said Buck.

"Yes," said Jeannette.

She waited for him to wish her luck, but he said nothing.

Some passing spirit of rebellion touched her. "I suppose you strongly disapprove," she said.

"Of what?" said Buck.

"Of my work at the theatre," she said, stiffening.

"Oh, no!" said Buck. "I think you are simply magnificent."

It took her breath away. She had been primed for battle. His approbation overwhelmed her, depriving her of words.

He took the initiative with absolute simplicity. "I have never admired you more," he said, "or dreamed that you could hold your own so well."

She felt herself flush in the darkness. No word from Buck had ever before given her so much pleasure.

"Thank you," she said, and she parted with him with that warmth of gladness still about her heart.

She went back to her room that she had left two hours before in such misery of soul, and she marvelled to find

the whole atmosphere changed. She was actually humming a Christmas hymn as she entered.

She lighted the gas-fire and sat down before it. So they were all getting married, as Lady Varleigh had predicted! It was curious how little she cared. In fact she hoped they would all be very happy.

"I suppose it isn't in me to care for anyone," she said, and then stopped short at a most fantastic thought.

Why was she so strangely happy to-night after the intense suffering she had endured earlier in the day? Was it only because her loneliness had been lifted by the warm hand-clasp of a friend?

She sat very still, considering the matter. Surely she wasn't—she couldn't be—falling in love with Buck! Somehow the thought was not so ludicrous as it would have been a few weeks before. Buck had surprised her. Not by his tenacity; that had always been there. In fact she had long regarded it as his most wearisome attribute. No, it was something else in Buck that had caught her sudden attention and arrested her habitual disdain. She did not know quite what it was, but unaccountably, amazingly, it thrilled her. She had an odd suspicion that she had somehow misjudged him, that he was not in fact the utter nincompoop that she had always believed him to be. In taking up manual work in order to be near her he had shown originality,—more, strength. And she had never credited him with either. She felt like a practised mathematician who for once has made a wrong calculation. It disconcerted her, this unknown quantity. She did not quite understand how to deal with it, how to make the sum come right.

And there was something else behind that made any further calculation on an ordered basis almost impossible, because if the one thing were wrong probably all the rest was wrong too. And what she had once with sweep-

ing contempt judged to be weakness might in reality be the sign of a force with which she was quite unable to cope. He had called himself the rebel in her camp. Was it possible that he had so established and fortified himself there that she was powerless to cast him out?

She got up, breathing quickly, and began to pace the room. It had not happened yet! Surely it had not happened yet! She was still mistress of herself, of her emotions, her desires, her own most secret heart. She was not going to allow Buck Wetherby—of all people!—to push his way in thus. To-day had been no fair test. She had been tired and lonely, hopelessly at a disadvantage. To-morrow would be quite different. To-morrow would see her brilliantly established on her own merits, borne on the crest of the wave, as Ritter had put it. She must cling, whatever happened, to her most precious independence. She had resisted so long. She must never waver now.

But all the while she knew that she was wavering because of that unknown quantity that she did not understand.

She went to bed at length with the problem still seething in her brain, and dreamed that she was clad in armour of highly sensitive steel, while Buck with his new disconcerting originality had armed himself with an immense magnet, by which he drew her irresistibly after him in spite of her most frantic efforts not to go.

Waking in the grey December dawn she succeeded in recapturing her commonsense, but she felt strangely shaken and nervous and realized that the ordeal of meeting Buck again weighed upon her far more heavily than that of making her first appearance upon the stage.

She tried to rest during the day, but no repose came to her. She went earlier than she had intended to the theatre because the feeling of suspense had become un-

bearable. But she found no one there, and so went for a walk in the sloppy streets to wile away the time.

The long queue at the pit-door gave her a sharp feeling of uneasiness as she returned, but she mastered this at once. She was not going to let herself be intimidated by a harmless crowd like that.

Several of Otto's girls had arrived when she re-entered the theatre, but she looked in vain for Peach Warner in the narrow dressing-room which they shared with two others. As Peach herself did not have to appear very early in the revue and Jeannette's turn came very near the end, there was no cause for anxiety. But nevertheless she felt anxious. She had hoped for ample time to inspect and if necessary readjust the gauze dress regarding which there had been so much discussion.

There was nothing to be done, however, but to wait, and she set herself to do so with what patience she could muster.

She sat down and tried, as she was still alone, to interest herself in re-reading Lady Varleigh's last letter which was full of loving solicitude on her behalf. Lady Varleigh did not know the nature of her present venture. She had decided to tell her only when success was assured, especially as her dear old friend was evidently in a pessimistic mood.

"I am so sorry to hear that you could not endure life at the Kingswolds'," she wrote. "I am not altogether surprised, for I know I could never have stood it myself. But, darling, my heart misgives me. What can I do for you now? Write and tell me! Or better still, come and tell me! I am wanting you more than ever, my beautiful Jeannette. I wonder how many times in the day I send you my love. Does it reach you, child of my heart? I would so love to show you some of these smart hideosities with their painted faces. In these days of

long-haired men and short-haired women one wonders where all the glory of the world has gone to. It is almost a cult of ugliness. Even the really pretty ones try to make themselves ugly, and how many—alas!—succeed!

"Have you heard anything of Buck lately? Sir Philip has bought the Hall, and I believe—strictly *entre nous*—that the money for it was divided equally among the three of them. A very fine young man, Jeannette, if this is true! May he be rewarded!"

It was at this point that a low knock took Jeannette to the door; to find a man in working-clothes standing in the semi-darkness outside.

"It's me," said Buck. "I've got to go and do some scene-shifting, but I just came round to see if you were here."

Her hand went out to him. She could not help it. It seemed to act of itself. And for the moment her heart beat so fast that she could not speak.

"All right?" asked Buck gently.

She forced out an answer. "Quite," she said.

"Good!" He released her hand. "I hope it won't make any difference to you," he said, smiling at her. "But I'm working the curtain to-night. And when you go on, I shall be close by. You don't mind?"

His friendly grey eyes looked straight into hers. She read no subtlety in them. Yet—yet—she was somehow sure he had achieved that arrangement himself. Why did her heart behave so strangely? Was she glad—was she sorry—to know that he was near?

"No,—I don't mind," she managed to say.

"Good!" said Buck again. "Well, good-bye! I'm going now."

He went, and she realized as he did so that, ordinary as he might be, he held himself better than most men in working-clothes.

"He hasn't learnt to slouch yet," she said to herself with a faint smile.

There was no denying that she had never seen him to greater advantage.

Peach Warner did not come in until after the revue had begun and the other two girls had gone on to the stage. She brought Jeannette's dress with her and handed it to her in almost total silence. Then she began her own transformation.

Jeannette unrolled the parcel and looked at its contents. A moment later she rose with very bright eyes and tightly-compressed lips, and dropped the shining gauze upon the floor.

"I refuse to wear that," she said.

"You can't help yourself," said Peach. She added after a moment as she daubed her face with grease-paint, "There's the veil."

"Where is it?" said Jeannette.

"Somewhere among my things." Peach did not even look round.

Jeannette began to search for it. Her hands were trembling. She was furiously angry. Ritter had played her false. The dress might pass muster—doubtless it would, for they knew how near the wind it was safe to sail—but it utterly revolted her own personal feelings. Suggestiveness carried to the verge of indecency was its obvious aim, and she almost felt that the latter alone would have been preferable.

She failed to find the veil, and Peach was plainly too busy to help her. She went out at last, still shaking with anger, to look for Ritter.

But he was nowhere to be found. The theatre was ringing with a resounding chorus. There was no one to attend to her. She went back baffled.

"You'd better be quick," said Peach. "They've put

your turn a bit forward, and the dresser is away ill. I forgot to tell you."

Jeannette felt like a trapped creature. What could she do?

"The veil!" she said.

"Oh, drat the veil!" said Peach. "I'll find it when I come back. You get dressed!"

There was no help for it. She began to undress. Peach made up her face before her own call came, but she had no time for more. She went, and Jeannette was alone.

She put on the dress with loathing. She hated herself in it. But the trapped sensation persisted. She felt she had no choice.

"Can I possibly go on with this?" she asked herself.

There came a knock at the door, and she went to open. Ritter at last!

He went back a step at sight of her. "By Jove!" he said.

There was no mistaking the keen admiration of his look. She felt an instant's misgiving as to her own judgment.

"I say," he said, "you are superb! Aren't you glad we had it altered? You'll take them all by storm."

"I don't like it myself," she said.

He swept her opinion aside with an imperious gesture. "You don't know anything about it. How could you? Besides, things look so totally different across the footlights. You've got nothing whatever to be troubled about. You are absolutely It."

He came inside and gave her a closer and more critical survey.

"Yes, look just like that!" he said. "You can't improve upon it. It's the sublimest thing we've ever done. Veil? What about the veil? Oh, I took that away. You

don't want a veil. Spread your hair out! That's right. By Jove! What lovely hair you've got! It's an unusual possession these days. I want you to burst on them—just like that. I'll come behind with you and pose you."

His enthusiasm had its usual infectious effect. It was impossible not to be influenced by it. She began to think that her inexperience had led her astray. Perhaps the whole thing would look different from across the footlights. She earnestly hoped so. In any case remonstrance was useless, and she attempted no more.

Ritter proved himself as able as any dresser, and the sheer business-like zeal of his attitude was a help. Jeannette had recovered most of her customary self-possession when her call came and she went with him to the back of the stage.

She did not see Buck, and concluded that he must be on the other side. The chorus of worshippers before the golden shrine was in full swing as she mounted to her place by means of some rough steps at the back. She did not feel nervous now. There was too much to think about, and her whole soul was concentrated upon the part she had to play.

She had been advertised as Jenny Wyn, and she was satisfied that no one knew her identity, and as to possible recognition her fears were very slight. She had completely dropped out of her old sphere, and no one would dream of looking for her here.

Ritter remained with her up to the last moment. She was in fact a little afraid that he would stay too long. But that extremely wide-awake young man knew very well what he was doing, and he departed in time, with a final word of encouragement.

"Don't be afraid of 'em! You're going to be—all right."

Then he was gone, and the wonderful doors in

front of her slid apart, revealing the goddess in the shrine.

Her first impression was of dazzling, blinding light. Then came the tremendous chorus of welcome from the garish crowd below her, and as she slowly rose with hands outspread the spirit of success caught Jeannette. She remained perfectly calm to all outward seeming, but her veins were on fire. She knew in that moment that she held the whole theatre spell-bound by that magnetism which is greater than beauty. She forgot everything else, and became that which Otto Paul had visualized—a queen in her own right.

With her veiling hair all about her, she stood on the golden steps, and as the singing ceased a great sound of applause arose from the auditorium. The magic of her had penetrated to the furthest corner of the building.

The rest was sheer triumph, and she drank deep of it, for it was long since she had tasted that wine of the gods. The glamour of the stage which had scarcely appealed to her before filled her whole being now with a rapture that was like intoxication. She forgot everything but the marvel of her overwhelming success.

And it was all accomplished without one word from her. She had taken them by storm, as Ritter had said. The rare charm of her, the secret lure, the splendid simplicity, and the undeniable audacity which underlay the whole idea, each had its own impression. The power which Otto Paul had first detected in her had been used to good effect and had made its ineradicable mark. Very few who saw her on that night of her astounding triumph were wholly to forget the vision.

The coming of the armoured knight was to Jeannette something of an anti-climax, but the audience delighted in it. She felt a strong antipathy to the touch of the mailed arms, and it seemed to her that he clasped her more firmly than was by any means necessary. She en-

dured it, however, for the sake of her triumph, and when the curtain fell the perfect roar of enthusiasm satisfied her that it had been worth while.

Ritter the ubiquitous was there waiting for her. "You'll have to go in front," he said. "Do you mind?"

She laughed at the idea. Her nerves were strung to a pitch of minding nothing just then. She went in front, and received with smiling graciousness such an ovation as might have satisfied a *prima donna.*

Retiring again, she was startled by the sight of Buck in attendance upon the curtain. Actually she had forgotten Buck.

She turned a laughing face towards him, for the audience were still calling for her, but he did not smile in response. She could not read his expression, but it certainly betrayed no pleasure. She turned away again with the old exasperation. After all, what did it matter —what could it matter—what Buck thought? In comparison with this tremendous triumph nothing seemed to matter. She had reached the crest of the wave in a single night.

And then a voice spoke at her shoulder. She looked round sharply and met two eyes that looked at her in a fashion vaguely familiar out of the vizor of a helmet.

"What is it?" she said.

"Will you come with me to Otto Paul at once?" said the man in armour. "He wants to see you and congratulate you before he goes."

She thought the request a strange one, but all her experiences just now were strange. She did not stay to question.

"Yes, I will come," she said. "Where is he?"

"This way," said the man in armour.

And without further words she followed him. The clamour of applause died away behind her.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE MAN IN ARMOUR

They went through the building by devious passages and staircases that were none too well lighted, and Jeannette had begun to wonder why Otto Paul could not have come to her himself and so have saved her this trouble when her guide stopped before a closed door at the end of a gloomy corridor.

He opened it. The room was in darkness, and he switched on a light. Jeannette hesitated to enter, for it was not the room in which Otto Paul had received her on the previous occasion.

"Come in!" said the man in armour. "He won't keep you waiting long."

She went in and he followed her. It was a good-sized room fitted more as a library than an office. A fire burned cheerily on the hearth with an arm-chair on one side and a couch on the other, both upholstered in red leather. A large writing-table occupied the window end, and this was littered with books and papers. There was also a tray with glasses and a tall bottle of champagne towering over sundry other bottles.

"We are going to drink to your future," said the man in armour. "And then transact a small matter of business which will, I hope, be quite satisfactory to you."

That startled her. For the first time she bestowed her

full attention upon him. She knew that rasping, half-foreign voice. But even then she was incredulous. Morgenthal had never played that part before.

"Who is it?" said Jeannette sharply.

He laughed gratingly, malignantly it seemed to her.

"My dear Miss Wyngold, I wondered how long it would take you to find me out. It is not the first time I have appeared on the boards of The Caravan, and the rôle of your knight in armour appealed to me." He laughed again. "Except for the armour—which I am now with your permission going to discard."

He had already pulled off his gauntlets, and he tossed them down with the words and began to loosen helmet and gorget.

Jeannette watched him as one fascinated. She knew now why his touch had been unpleasant to her, but she had never suspected this.

He had divested himself of mailed coat and breastplate before she had recovered from her surprise sufficiently to speak again.

She did so then with the utmost coldness. "Where is Mr. Paul?"

He shrugged his shoulders. His dark face wore an evil smile. His thick red lips were sneering.

"He will be here soon no doubt," he said. "Won't you sit down by the fire and wait?"

He was lying to her. The suspicion flashed through Jeannette's brain while he was speaking. She turned on the instant to the door.

"I will see Mr. Paul in the morning," she said.

Her fingers found the handle. She moved it round and round without result. Baffled, she turned.

"Won't you wait a minute?" said Morgenthal suavely. "It has a spring catch. You can't do it by yourself."

She detected a mocking quality in his voice, but the in-

stinct of caution which was strong within her checked her from flinging an open challenge. She stood stiffly waiting.

And as she stood she was aware again of the tawdriness and inadequacy of the dress they had made her wear. She tried to tell herself that it was of no importance, but it deprived her of her usual self-possession. She felt humbled, ashamed.

Morgenthal was plainly in no hurry to go to her assistance. He laid aside the last of his armour with almost exaggerated deliberation, and revealed himself in a loosely-fitting lounge-suit. Then he went to the writing-table, took up the champagne bottle and with great accuracy clipped the wire.

Something cold seemed to touch Jeannette's heart. She spoke, the length of the room between them.

"Mr. Morgenthal!"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Come over here, Miss Wyngold," he said. "We must celebrate this great occasion suitably. Mr. Paul has possibly been detained. We will not wait for him."

A tremor that was almost a shudder went through Jeannette. "I wish to leave immediately," she said. "Please open the door!"

But Morgenthal opened the bottle of champagne instead, and poured out two foaming glasses.

"Now, Miss Wyngold," he said, "I assure you this is something of an honour though you do not seem to appreciate it. Mr. Paul begged me to keep you entertained until his arrival. Please do not let us spoil the occasion by any foolishness!"

"Open the door!" said Jeannette.

He set down the champagne bottle and turned. "As you will!" he said, and his voice had changed. She heard in it something that was like the angry snarl of a beast.

He crossed the room towards her, and as he came, though his gait was not unsteady, there was about him a species of suppressed violence that opened her eyes very suddenly to a fact which till that moment she had not suspected. He had been drinking.

Tensely she awaited him, moving aside as he reached her.

"The door, please!" she said.

He broke into a laugh—a fiendish horrible sound—and in a moment he had her in his grip.

"You wish to see Otto Paul in the morning?" he said. "So you shall—so you shall! Neither he—nor anyone else—will disturb us to-night."

Terror caught her,—blind, paralysing terror. She put her hands to her throat, feeling choked.

His hold was merciless, his whole expression brutal. "Yes," he said. "I've got you now, little fire-eater. You thought you could flout Karl Morgenthal to his face, didn't you? Once, twice? Ah, well, the third time is his turn. You know now—do you not?—that I have got you completely at my mercy?"

He smacked his red lips over the words, and his hand stroked her neck, her arms, with a gloating appraising touch as he held her. His eyes had a fierce, insane look that made her realize far more than his words how much mercy she might expect from him. Yet that part of Jeannette which no adversity had yet conquered sprang up undaunted even by this extremity. With a supreme effort she banished her panic.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Morgenthal," she said, her voice cold and clean-ringing as a stone flung upon ice. "How dare you touch me? Take your arms away!"

She spoke with such authority that for a moment—only a moment—he made as if he would obey. Then he laughed at her—an evil, insulting laugh.

"So!" he said. "I forget myself, do I? Then I do myself—and you—an injustice which shall be remedied. But first—there is just one small matter which must be settled between us. Come! I will show you."

He led her, his arm about her, to the writing-table, and put her into a chair.

She did not resist him further. Instinctively she reserved her strength. A type-written document lay in front of her. She looked at it, and read her own name—Jeannette Wyngold. In a flash she realized his intention. The paper was obviously a contract, and he had brought her hither by trickery—probably with Otto Paul's approval—to compel her to sign it. That meant—her shrewd brain leaped to another point—that her success to-night had been even greater than she had thought. They would not risk her leaving the theatre with that contract unsigned.

She looked up to find him watching her. He smiled with vile familiarity, and set a brimming glass of champagne in front of her.

"Let us drink to your prosperity!" he said.

"No, thank you," said Jeannette.

"No? Later perhaps!" He pushed the glass to one side, and picked up a pen. "We will transact our little business first. I will show you where to sign."

"I refuse to sign anything to-night," said Jeannette.

"My dear Miss Wyngold!" he began.

She met his eyes, clear condemnation in her own. "I refuse to sign anything to-night," she said again.

"You refuse?" He bent suddenly down to her, threatening her. "You dare to refuse!" he said.

"Dare!" said Jeannette, with freezing scorn. "You coward!"

She rose with the words, but in an instant he caught her, and bent her backwards with cruel force over the

wooden back of the chair. "You refuse?" he said again. "You refuse?"

She gasped with pain. "O God," she said, "deliver me from this madman!"

He increased his pressure with devilish ingenuity. "You refuse?" he hissed.

She felt her balance going and grasped him to save herself.

He took it for a sign of yielding. Her touch inflamed him. "Ah!" he said exultantly. "I thought you would come to your senses. Little fire-eater, I knew I could conquer you. Leave her to me—that is what I said. I have never yet met the woman I could not tame."

He pulled her back on to her feet and held her suffocatingly in his arms. "But you are too lovely to hurt!" he said.

Jeannette fought him then wildly, frantically, as she would have fought a serpent. Her hair broke loose from the fillet about her head and flung hither and thither in tossing strands. And when with deadly strength he bore down her resistance, she sought to pull it over her face to save it from the pollution of his lips.

No cry escaped her in that desperate struggle. Her whole being was concentrated upon freeing herself. It must be either escape or death with her, for she would never cry for mercy, nor would she ever yield while life remained.

In the end, as her strength became exhausted, a mist came over her senses, but she still struggled on till unutterable weakness overcame her. And then there came a hard, insistent knocking which she thought must be the last beats of her failing heart. . . .

## CHAPTER X

### THE CHAMPION

SOMEONE was speaking to her. Someone was calling her.

"Jeannette! Jeannette!"

She opened her eyes. Was she dreaming? Was she dead? "Father!" she said.

"No, dear, no! It's me—Buck!"

Very insistently he disillusioned her, and the thought came to her—how like him to spoil her dream! Then she awoke.

She was lying on the red couch in that dreadful room, and Buck—in his shirt-sleeves and looking strangely disreputable—was stooping over her.

She stared at him for a moment or two. Then she sat up. "That man!" she said, and shuddered violently. "Where—where is he?"

Buck gave an odd jerk of the head as though to indicate something behind him. "Are you better? Can you walk?" he said.

"Of course!" said Jeannette.

He helped her to her feet. "Then we'd better go. Hold on to me!"

She did so, glad of his support, for she felt dizzy and uncertain of herself. Her knees were shaking.

"All right?" said Buck.

Then she saw that something which he had vaguely indicated, and caught her breath in horror. Morgenthal was lying inert in a spread-eagle position on the floor exactly like a child's doll that has been picked up and flung down in a fury.

"Is he dead?" whispered Jeannette.

"No," said Buck. "He's taken a header, that's all. Come along!"

His indifference amazed her. She looked at him, and quite suddenly she was afraid. Was this Buck—the tame fool who had run so patiently at her chariot-wheels for so long? His face had wholly lost its ordinary look. It wore a smile indeed, but such a smile as she had never connected with it before. And there burned a flare in his grey eyes that was somehow terrible.

His hand urged her, and she went with him from the room. He pulled the door closed after them and picked up something from the threshold. With renewed wonder Jeannette saw that it was a workman's bag of tools.

She asked no question; there was that about Buck which did not encourage questions just then. In unbroken silence they went through the passages, he guiding, and closing all doors methodically behind them.

Her strength began to return and her pulses to steady as they passed down through the silent building. When they reached the ground-floor she had almost recovered her normal composure.

But that curious feeling of awe persisted. This man in workman's dress beside her was a being she did not know.

The dressingrooms were deserted and the passage in darkness, but Buck found the door and switched on the light. He entered with her, and turned the key.

"Get dressed as quickly as you can!" he said, and turned his back upon her.

It was an order, such an order as Jeannette had never received before. But she had no thought except to obey. She realized that he would not suffer her to go beyond his sight in that place, and instead of resenting it she was thankful. She proceeded to tear off the torn drapery and don her own clothes, while her guard stood, motionless, uncompromising, his face to the door. She fancied that he was listening for something; but nothing happened, no one came near.

"I am ready," she said at last.

He turned round. "Take my arm when we get outside!" he said. "And don't let go till I tell you!"

"I am quite all right now," she said.

"That isn't the reason," said Buck.

He produced a cap from his bag of tools and put it on. Then he opened the door and switched out the lights.

"Now!" he said.

She took his arm obediently—a strangely submissive and docile Jeannette. They went down the passages that led to the stage-door, he in his workman's kit, she in a long rain-coat.

"Keep your head down!" said Buck.

There was a porter in the tiny office by the stage-door. He accosted Buck.

"They're still waiting, but they're beginning to think she's gone."

"All right," said Buck.

He led Jeannette out into a seething crowd of gaping sight-seers.

"Good gracious!" said Jeannette.

"Don't talk!" he said.

They had difficulty in pushing their way through to the main street, but with patience and perseverance Buck attained his end. They emerged into the thoroughfare and found themselves able to move more freely. When

they had walked a few yards Buck hailed a passing taxi.

"I can walk," Jeannette protested. "It's no distance."

"Get in, please!" said Buck.

Again she obeyed him as one who had no choice.

Not a word passed between them during the short journey to her lodging. Then, as he helped her to alight, "Have you your key?" said Buck.

She gave it to him. He paid the taxi-driver and opened the door.

She felt no surprise this time that he should follow her in and up the narrow stairs to her room. She entered first, found the matches and lighted the gas. And again oddly she was afraid. That Buck—Buck of all people—could command the situation thus!

He entered behind her and closed the door. In the utter silence of the house they confronted one another. He was very pale, and that strangely-kindled fire still burned in his eyes.

She waited for him to speak.

He did so, quietly indeed, but with an authority that there was no gainsaying. "Jeannette, I have got to know exactly what happened to-night."

She answered him with that new docility that was somehow the only attitude to adopt. "I don't mind your knowing in the least. Shall we sit down?"

There was only one chair in the bare little room. He drew it forward for her, but she sat down on the end of the bed.

"You have that!" she said.

He sat down facing her. "You will tell me the whole truth," he said.

"Of course I will!" said Jeannette. But she did not find the telling very easy in face of what she felt to be the immense self-suppression of his silence. She gave him

the bare outlines of the evening's happenings, of the trickery of Morgenthal, of his drunkenness, his vileness generally.

"Did he hurt you?" said Buck when she stopped.

"Nothing but a few bruises," she assured him. "I shall be all right in the morning."

"Why did you faint?" said Buck.

She shivered. "I don't know. It isn't in the least like me. I was rather worked up. He was so—so horrible."

"You are telling me everything?" he said.

She met his look though it seemed in some fashion to pierce her. "Of course I am telling you everything, Buck," she said. "I can't tell you why I fainted. Perhaps—perhaps it was fright!"

Such an admission for the proud Jeannette who feared no man! His look changed a little. The grimness softened. "Were you very frightened?" he said.

She tried to laugh. "I don't know. I was rather desperate. If I had only known it was you at the door, I shouldn't have been so foolish."

"You heard me at the door?" said Buck.

She nodded. "I didn't know what it was. I might have guessed, mightn't I? You—you are always there—or thereabouts."

"Not always, I am afraid," said Buck. "I had to get some tools together, or I should have been there sooner. I knew it was no use coming empty-handed."

"You knew it was Morgenthal?" questioned Jeannette.

"Yes, I knew," said Buck.

She looked at him in surprise. "But how did you know? I didn't!"

A faint gleam crossed his face. He did not answer her. "I will tell you now," he said, "what those people at the stage-door were waiting for. They were waiting for you."

Jeannette's eyes opened wide. "Buck! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," said Buck.

She drew a hard breath. "Then—I really have made a big success. Oh, what a pity!"

"It wasn't so much that," said Buck, with a return to his old tactlessness which she found curiously comforting. "They didn't want you on that account. Only because someone—Otto himself probably—had given you away. They all knew that you were Jeannette Wyngold, the banker's daughter. It has made quite a sensation. It will be in all the papers to-morrow."

"Buck!" She sprang to her feet in sheer dismay. "Oh, Buck, are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure," said Buck again. He also rose and stood, still facing her. "I shouldn't be upset about it if I were you," he said. "You can get away. You didn't sign the contract."

She looked at him tragically. If she had been borne on the crest of the wave an hour before, she had been toppled most ruthlessly now into the trough beyond.

"But what am I to do?" she said, and actually wrung her hands in despair. "What can I possibly do?"

He took her hands and held them. "I'll help you," he said.

She tried to withdraw from him. "You can't! You can't! Do you think I would take help like that?"

His grasp closed very gently and very surely upon her. "That is just it, Jeannette," he said. "You can go on pulling against me as long as you will. But there is only one person on this earth who may give you help before I do, and that is Lady Varleigh."

She gazed at him, startled. "What do you mean?"

He loosened his hold, but she did not free herself. She stood for that moment like a frightened child.

He answered her very quietly, very decidedly. "I mean

that if you will go to Lady Varleigh, then—and only then —I will get out of the way for good and all."

"Ah!" said Jeannette. She stood for a second or two regaining her composure with a certain measure of her old dignity; then she released herself, and spoke with a decision equal to his own. "Well, I am not going to Lady Varleigh," she said.

"Very well," said Buck.

She sent him one of her swift, darting looks that was like the rapid flight of a bird. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"Nothing," said Buck.

That baffled her, yet for some reason she breathed the more freely for it. The pointlessness of his devotion seemed to give her the upper hand again. In that moment he descended from the extraordinary heights to which by some unaccountable means he had managed to climb and resumed his every-day aspect and station.

She held out her hand to him with renewed confidence. "I am very grateful to you for all you have done," she said. "But I shall be quite all right now. You mustn't please bother to do any more."

"What are you going to do now?" said Buck.

She frowned. "How can I possibly tell? I shall find something no doubt."

He glanced round the room. "Do you really want me to leave you?" he said.

"But of course!" said Jeannette. "What else could you do?"

"Is there anyone responsible in the house?" he said.

"The baker's man and his wife," said Jeannette.

"Where do they sleep?" asked Buck.

"One floor down," said Jeannette.

"Is there any room anywhere in the building where I could spend the night?" he said.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" she exclaimed, surprised, touched, oddly embarrassed in spite of herself. "I wouldn't let you if there were."

"That isn't the point," said Buck gently. "Is there?"

That startled her afresh. The voice was the voice of Buck, but the words, simple as they were, had that something behind them with which till now she had never come in contact.

In the moment's uncertainty she found herself stammering. "I—I really don't know. I—don't expect so. Besides,—oh, really I don't think there is any need for that. Let me come down and let you out!"

He smiled a little. "All right, Jeannette. I'll go. Perhaps it would be better for you after all. We mustn't get you talked about."

Jeannette's lips curled. How like Buck to think of such a thing!

"I am not afraid of that," she said.

"No," he said. "You're never afraid of anything. That's just the worst of it. Well, I'll be going."

He squeezed her hand and turned to the door.

Jeannette followed him. "I shall have to turn the key when you're gone," she said.

"Sorry to trouble you," said Buck courteously.

They went downstairs again. In the narrow passage by the front-door he spoke again. "Jeannette, I must see you to-morrow. You won't be leaving here before midday?"

"Certainly not," said Jeannette.

"Then I'll call round," said Buck. "Good-night!"

He opened the door. A gust of icy rain blew in upon them.

"Shut it quickly!" he said. "It's horribly cold."

"You'll have such a wet walk," said Jeannette, with compunction.

"It doesn't matter," he said, smiling at her. "Go to bed now, and get a good night's rest!"

He went out with the words, and pulled the door after him.

"Good-bye!" called Jeannette, and shut and locked it.

Then she turned round, electric torch in hand, and shivered at the emptiness and desolation.

Though she would not have owned it, her nerves were badly shakened, and once or twice in the night she started up in quivering alarm, hearing the rain beating upon her window and thinking she heard footsteps stealthily approaching. But in the end complete weariness overcame all other sensations. She slept in blessed forgetfulness of all fear, as one round whom a magic circle of protection had been drawn.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE WRONG CALCULATION

In the morning she reviewed the situation and took stock of her diminished purse. There was no doubt about it; her means were rapidly dwindling. And what was she going to do next?

She had a great desire to formulate some plan before Buck appeared, but she could think of no one to help her except Mrs. Ammer. She was nearing the end of her resources, and this last venture had been sheer loss. For she could never go near the theatre again. The bare thought was abhorrent to her. The vile publicity which had been forced upon her had made any further progress in that direction impossible for ever. She was too angry at present to be very regretful, but there was no evading the necessity for immediate action. She could not afford to spend more than another week in her present abode without earning something to keep her head above water.

"Just one week between me and destitution," she said to herself. "One week! One week!"

It was a wretched morning, bitterly cold and still raining, with occasional showers of sleet to relieve the monotony. From the state of the streets when she ran

out to secure some breakfast she imagined that it had been raining ever since she had closed the door upon Buck.

She bought a paper on her way back, and found full confirmation of the sensation of the night before. Large headlines announced the fact that Jeannette Wyngold, daughter of the famous banker-swindler, had taken to the boards to earn her living. There was sarcastic comment in plenty as well as a few genuine tributes to her genius and originality. She glanced through it, sitting in her freezing little bedroom, and eventually crumpled the paper into a ball with furious energy and cast it from her. Did they imagine—could they imagine—that she would ever show her face again on any stage after this?

An interval of deep depression followed this outbreak of indignation. What on earth was she to do now? What could she possibly do?

Again the thought of Mrs. Ammer came to her, as she paced the room for warmth. Mrs. Ammer had always disapproved of her work at the theatre and had offered to find her honest employment elsewhere if she would relinquish it. But Mrs. Ammer would also know her identity now, and might possibly have changed her mind in consequence. The most miserable indecision descended upon Jeannette. How could she bring herself to face even Mrs. Ammer—an honest hardworking woman who had never had any shameful secret to hide?

Finally, feeling despair very near, she busied herself by putting her few belongings together in preparation for departure, for she would certainly have to give up her lodging very shortly. That at least was certain amid the sea of uncertainty in which she was struggling.

Any occupation was a relief, and gradually her hopeless dejection began to lift somewhat. Even yet she would find a job, and that without applying to Mrs. Ammer.

"I'll put my name down at a registry-office for a housemaid's place this very afternoon," said Jeannette, and closed her lips very firmly upon her decision.

She was feeling much more like herself when at noon a quiet knock at her door told her of Buck's coming. She had not permitted herself to think very much about Buck during all her cogitations, for it seemed to her more than likely that what had appeared extraordinary about him the night before had been but the reflection of an unusual state of mind in herself, brought about by an equally unusual situation. She had not been in a position to regard him with her customary impartiality, and she was inclined to tell herself that his timely service had magnified him beyond his merits.

With this thought in her mind she bade him enter and checked the quick flush which she could not wholly prevent at his entrance.

But the moment she saw him she realized that the extraordinary element was still present. She found to her annoyance that she could not meet his eyes beyond the swift scanning of an instant which revealed to her the presence of that baffling unknown quantity with which she had no means as yet of dealing.

He held her hand for a second or two before he spoke, and she had an odd suspicion that he was bracing himself for some ordeal as he did so. She braced herself accordingly. For the sake of her prestige he was not going to have everything his own way again, if she could prevent it.

"Good morning!" she said briskly.

"How are you?" said Buck.

"Perfectly all right, thank you." She withdrew her hand, smiling. "I have almost forgotten last night's adventure. But you were right about the publicity. I can't go to the theatre again."

"I have brought you a letter," said Buck.

She noticed as he spoke that he had discarded his workman's clothes and was dressed as she was accustomed to see him. For some reason she was glad of this. It seemed to make it easier for her to regain her supremacy.

"A letter!" she said. "Who is it from?"

"From Paul and Morgenthal—jointly," said Buck.

His tone brought her eyes swiftly upwards. "Good gracious!" she said almost involuntarily.

He had taken a letter from his pocket. "Won't you read it?" he said.

She took and opened it. He stood immovable while she read it.

A little tremor went through Jeannette. Just for a moment she experienced a most unaccountable difficulty in focussing her attention. Then the words before her eyes took sense, and she gasped in astonishment.

The letter was an abject apology for the insults she had suffered, and it was signed by Otto Paul and Karl Morgenthal.

She looked up at length with a hard-beating heart. "Good heavens, Buck!" she said. "Which of them wrote this?"

"Morgenthal," said Buck. "At my dictation."

"Your dictation!" Again her eyes came to his and again they fell. "How—how on earth did you manage it?"

"That doesn't matter," said Buck, and she thought there was more of weariness than grimness in his tone though it held both in a marked degree. "We won't waste any more time over them. Ritter says he is coming to see you this afternoon, but I told him you would not receive him, so he may change his mind."

"Why did you tell him that?" said Jeannette.

"He only wants to persuade you to go back," said Buck.

She felt her heart quicken. "And can't I decide that question for myself?" she said.

"I understood that it was already decided," said Buck.

He was unanswerable. More, he was mastering the situation again. She made a determined effort to assert herself.

"I did not empower you to act for me," she said.

"No," said Buck.

"Then why—" She stopped herself, checked by some instinct she could not question. "Perhaps it is as well," she said, after a moment. "No, I shall not see him. I am going out this afternoon."

"Where to?" said Buck.

She hesitated to tell him, but in the end she did so. "I am going to the Quality Registry Office. I have decided to go in for domestic work of some kind."

"What kind?" said Buck.

Again she did not want to answer, but something compelled. "I shall apply for a housemaid's place. It will be a living, and—and—I shall probably like it."

"You!" said Buck.

His tone startled her momentarily, the pain of it, the almost fierce protest.

Then sharply she recovered herself. Her chin went up in the old proud way. "And why not?" she said. "Surely a housemaid—if she works honestly—has every reason to regard herself as an honourable member of the community!"

"I don't dispute that," said Buck quietly. "But honesty is one thing and fitness is another. You have never trained for that sort of work. You have not the physical endurance."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Jeannette. "Would you say that

if I took up hospital nursing which is generally allowed to be infinitely harder than the hardest housemaid's work?"

"I should trust to your being better looked after in a hospital," said Buck.

"Ridiculous!" scoffed Jeannette.

He accepted the rebuke without remonstrance, almost as if he were too weary of the whole subject to pursue it further.

"Well, let me beg one thing of you!" he said. "Don't do anything without careful consideration! And let me have the honour—the very great honour, Jeannette—of knowing beforehand what you decide to do!"

He spoke with an earnestness that moved her. She realized that the appeal held more force than any he had made hitherto. It brought to her mind the memory of his face as she had seen it on that night when she had found him praying in the church.

She found it impossible to scoff any longer. Instead she held out her hand.

"Yes, Buck, I will let you know," she said. "And thank you—thank you a hundred times—for all you have done for me!"

He drew a hard breath as he gripped her hand. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for you," he said.

And with that he turned very suddenly, with an impetuosity she had never before associated with him, and was gone before she had time to realize that he had opened the door.

She sat down after his departure and read again the letter he had brought. And when she looked up from it she was conscious of an unwonted feeling of weakness. This was Buck's doing—the work of her despised and sole-remaining vassal—and it stirred her to the depths. Once more the sum was coming out wrong. She knew

not what to make of it, for all her calculations were utterly at fault. She was aware of a factor mysterious, incomprehensible, which nevertheless it was impossible to ignore. Buck had done these things. Buck had delivered her. And now he had actually claimed her promise to be informed as to her future—and she had given it to him! Buck the contemptible!

Instinctively she snatched at the only weapon within reach. "That's why he went away in such a hurry!" she said. "He was afraid he had gone too far!"

But in her heart she knew that this was not so. In her heart she was asking herself, with that inner tremor so strange to her, how much further it was possible that he yet might go.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE ONLY THING LEFT

In the afternoon Jeannette sallied forth upon her next venture. She did not go with any very high hopes, but her demeanour was as brisk and self-assured as of yore. Whatever happened, she would hold her head high before the world. So she told herself.

She had some distance to go and that cold, driving rain was still falling, but she walked the whole way to save her purse. In her plain felt hat and rainproof coat, she was confident at least of one thing. No one would recognize her thus.

Reaching the office, she briefly announced her business and was taken to a room in which a gaunt, elderly woman with glasses sat behind an enormous book. She gave Jeannette a curt nod.

"Sit down!" she said. "What is it you're wanting?"

Jeannette disliked her instantly and emphatically, but, as usual, suppressed all evidence of the fact. "I am wanting a situation as housemaid," she said.

"What name?" snapped the other.

Jeannette was ready. "My name is Jane Norman," she said, and unconsciously she made the announcement with all her old regal composure.

The eyes behind the glasses gave her a hard look. "What age?" demanded the hard, official voice.

"Twenty-one," said Jeannette.

"Where do you want to go? Town or country?"

"Oh, country," said Jeannette, and again unconsciously her tone held a note that was alien to the part she sought to play.

"Country," repeated the inquisitor, writing it down. "Any part?"

"Anywhere will do," said Jeannette.

"What wages?" came the next question, fired like a shot from a gun.

"Twenty pounds," said Jeannette.

Again the shining glasses were trained upon her. "That's very little for a girl of your age. Haven't you had any experience?"

"Not much," said Jeannette with dignity.

"Ever been out before?" A horribly straight shot this!

Jeannette's chin went up. "That's my affair," she said.

"We don't enter anyone on our books that hasn't got references," she was informed ruthlessly.

"I have references," said Jeannette with great distinctness.

"Oh, well!" This assertion evidently caused some disappointment. "What are they?"

"Miss Jeannette Wyngold has provided me with a written reference," said Jeannette, very steadily facing the glasses that so grimly fixed her.

Something moved, whether it was the glasses or the eyes behind them it was impossible to say. "That won't do you much good," she was curtly informed. "A recommendation for honesty from that quarter wouldn't be worth very much. The daughter of a scoundrel like that!"

"Stop!" said Jeannette.

She spoke quietly, but there must have been something awe-inspiring in her voice, for there came a quick breath from the other side of the table and the hasty pushing back of a chair.

There was a moment or two of tension, then the elder woman spoke, with obvious hostility. "Well I've some reason for calling him that. He robbed me of all my savings."

"But you got some of it back," said Jeannette.

"Very, very little,—less than a quarter." With intense bitterness the answer came. The hand that held the pen was trembling violently. "And I'd been saving all my life—to keep my mother from want!"

"Oh, I am sorry!" Jeannette said.

Again the aggressive glasses fixed her. "And you—you'd take a recommendation from a woman like that! I'd sooner starve, myself. Why, look at the hussy! She's got herself into all the papers for showing at a music-hall. There's a picture of her I've got here. Shameless I call it! Quite shameless!"

An illustrated paper was suddenly thrust in front of Jeannette. She saw herself in Court dress. And she saw herself as she had been sketched on the stage of The Caravan the night before. Involuntarily her hand went to her throat.

The woman facing her uttered a sharp exclamation. "Why," she said, "—why—I thought I'd seen you somewhere before!"

Jeannette was on her feet. She was as white as death, but she kept herself fast in hand. No one—no one had seen her falter yet.

"You will never see me again," she said, and with the words, her head held high, she turned and deliberately left the office.

Down again into the dingy streets and driving rain

with the December dusk already falling, and the blackness of utter despair in her heart!

She went forth blindly, not recking of direction. Her last hope had failed her. She was branded an outcast, destitute and alone.

In that hour Jeannette Wyngold—once the proud and successful society girl, eagerly sought after, jealously courted,—went down into a darkness that appalled her soul. The grim hunter whom she had eluded for so long and with so splendid a courage had caught her at last. She was a prisoner in the deepest dungeon, and there was none to help.

Afterwards, the wanderings of that terrible afternoon were as a blurred and awful nightmare. Failure stared at her whichever way she turned. Fear met her at every corner.

Once a man with evil eyes accosted her, followed her, but she fled with the fleetness of a frightened child, turning and dodging down streets and alleys which she had never seen before, intent only upon evading her pursuer.

She succeeded, but when she paused for breath she had no longer the vaguest idea of her whereabouts, and the dusk had turned to the dark of a wet December night.

Scared, she checked her unreasoning flight and tried to remember how she had arrived in that place of desolation. She found herself in a narrow alley between high fences, and she was vaguely aware that she had turned into it from a squalid street in which she had not dared to linger. She could not go back obviously, but she was afraid to go on. Yes, afraid! Jeannette the proud, who had never acknowledged fear in her life! She owned it now; for it lay deathly cold against her heart.

Panting, she stood there with the rain pouring down upon her, the far-off roar of traffic mingling with the utterly dreary sound of dripping gutters. Never till that

moment had she realized the terrible loneliness of the destitute and friendless.

She wondered if in the whole of great London there could be any human being more hopelessly and completely alone than she.

And then, breaking through the dreadful silence, there came a sound, familiar and inexpressibly sweet, floating down on the rain-washed air—the soft, deep chime of a church-clock.

It came to her like a message, curiously emphatic, as though a voice had spoken to her soul. She started and listened.

Those notes were familiar to her. She had heard them through many sleepless nights. It was the church at the corner of Haddington Square, and—she grasped the fact suddenly—she was standing in the alley that came out beside it into the square,—that alley in which she had taken refuge to avoid too abrupt a meeting with Buck.

A vast relief possessed her. The awful feeling of isolation and exile lifted. Surely she had been led hither also! Quickly she ran forward, like a fugitive seeking sanctuary.

No mackintoshed figure awaited her now by the pillar-box as she turned the corner. The square was empty, a dripping desolation. But the sanctuary was there, and thither she turned her steps.

As before, the church was dimly lighted; it was too early for the evening service. She slipped in through the baize-door and found it empty. Softly she went up the aisle towards the lighted altar.

And then—half-way—something stayed her. It was no kneeling figure this time. Nothing but blank pews met her gaze. But a sharp pang suddenly smote her. Could it have been only memory?

She slipped into the same seat as on that former occasion and so to her knees in the silence.

But no prayer came to her now; she knew only an unutterable longing that pierced her like a sword. Why had she sent him away that night—besought him with tears to forget her? Surely in all her life she had never made a greater mistake! To try to alienate Buck, the staunch, the faithful, the true, when she needed him so—she needed him so! A great sob went through her. Ah, it was she who had been the fool, she who had despised the most precious treasure that life could hold for her! Just as the preacher had said, she had esteemed it of little worth just because it had always been there. And now it was the only thing in all the world left to her.

The only thing left! And suddenly, overwhelmingly, she realized that it was also the greatest thing she had ever known. Whence or how the knowledge came she could not have said. Only, kneeling there in the quiet church, it was as if a veil had been lifted from the eyes of her soul. She saw life from a different angle and all its values were changed.

Pride or shame, success or failure,—what did these matter? They were nothing—less than nothing—weighed in the great Balances as now she saw them weighed. And words which she herself had once spoken came strangely back to her:—"There is a Love which nothing on earth can effect." How well she remembered uttering those words—so long, long ago—to the man with whom she had imagined she would find happiness! He would have given her position, honour, and deliverance from all this desperate and sordid struggle for bare existence. But what did these things count with her now? They were nothing,—they were less than nothing. Even then, vaguely she had known it. And now the knowledge filled her, electrified her, renewed her to a

degree of vitality that was almost more than she could bear. What did anything matter—failure, shame, starvation even—so long as she might clasp this glowing wonder to her heart? For it was still her own. Burningly she knew it. He was waiting for her now, just as he had waited for so long with that dear, foolish patience of his. He was waiting. Again that amazing thrill went through her—the magic touch of that Power which can turn the old sad world into the ante-room of Heaven.

She rose up swiftly as though a voice had called her —just as Buck had risen on that night when she had sent him away—and she went out again into the pouring night with the glad step of the woman who goes to meet her lover.

## CHAPTER XIII

### BAD NEWS

"Why, goodness gracious, so it's you, my dear!" said Mrs. Ammer. "I were just a-goin' to step round to see you, I were."

"Oh, were you?" said Jeannette. "How very good of you!"

That Mrs. Ammer's intentions were serious was demonstrated by the fact that she had donned a rusty black hat with a large bunch of nodding cherries at the side, and she had a still more rusty umbrella in her hand.

"You come in, my dearie!" she said. "Me and m'usband—we'll be right proud to 'ave you under our roof. My word, and you ain't 'alf wet! Come in and take them drippin' cloes off and 'ave a drop o' tea!"

There was no resisting the earnest hospitality of this humble friend of hers. Jeannette entered thankfully, too touched to give immediate voice to her errand. That Mrs. Ammer should dream of taking the trouble, especially on such an unfavourable night, of stepping round to see her at the end of her own day of toil filled her with a warmth of gratitude for which she had no words.

She slipped off her sodden rain-coat and accompanied her into the stuffy little sittingroom.

"I'll light the fire," said Mrs. Ammer. "It won't take a minute."

"Oh no!" said Jeannette quickly. "Not for me, please! Mayn't I come into the kitchen? Will your husband mind?"

"Mind! Lor, no!" said Mrs. Ammer. "Not as it 'ud make a naporth of difference if he did. But it ain't very nice for the likes of you as is used to takin' tea in the King's palace."

"Oh, but I never did!" pleaded Jeannette, realizing that the portrait of herself in Court dress had conveyed this impression. "I've only been once, and then it wasn't to tea. Please let me come into the kitchen, Mrs. Ammer! I should like it so much best."

"That's just as *you* like, my dear," said Mrs. Ammer. "So long as you *'as* the tea. That's what matters."

She turned and led the way down the narrow passage to the humbler apartment at the back where Mr. Ammer was seated pipe in mouth with little Arriet perched on the arm of his chair reading funny bits from a cheap comic paper.

Both were reduced to embarrassed silence on Jeannette's entrance. Mr. Ammer made a jerky movement to take out his pipe.

"Oh, please don't!" said Jeannette. "It is so good of you to let me come in here."

Mr. Ammer made one great effort and uttered the only coherent remark which he ever succeeded in addressing to Jeannette.

"I'm proud to see yer, miss," he said. And with that he cleared his throat, spat into the fire and relapsed into gloomy silence.

Mrs. Ammer took the teapot off the stove and poured some of its well-matured contents into a cup.

"Sit yer down!" she said. "And, Arriet, you just get that currant cake what I made for Sunday out of the cupboard!"

Arriet brightly complied, and Jeannette was soon provided with a generous portion and planted straight in front of the fire, Mr. Ammer, protest notwithstanding, scraping back his chair to the farthest corner of the room.

"Now that's better!" said Mrs. Ammer encouragingly. "You looked more like a ghost than a human being when you came in just now. But there, my dear, it's a treat to see you, whatever you look like. You make a narty meal and you'll feel more like yourself!"

Somewhat to her surprise Jeannette found it not difficult to comply with this exhortation, but while she ate and drank she was listening incessantly for the sound of a step she knew coming along the passage.

She listened in vain, and at length, her meal finished, she mastered a certain hesitation and boldly asked for the lodger.

"Are you expecting Mr. Smith in soon?" she enquired, in a tone that was carefully impersonal.

Mrs. Ammer was poking the fire. She continued to poke it for several seconds, and Jeannette had begun to think that her enquiry had failed to reach her when very suddenly she turned round, poker in hand, and showed her a red face all crumpled with distress.

"My dear," she said, "I'm sorry to 'ave to tell you a piece of bad news. Mr. Smith 'e's been took ill and gone to the 'orspital."

"The hospital!" Jeannette gasped. "Why—why—what's the matter?"

All the warm glow died within her; there came again that sense of deadly cold at her heart. What fresh stroke of fate was this?

Mrs. Ammer's voice seemed to come to her from a great distance; she had to listen intently to catch the words. "'E come in hearly this mornin' all wet to the

bone, and said as 'ow 'e'd been hout hall night long, on business—that was what 'e said. And I'm sure it must 'ave been too, for 'e's such a good steady young man it couldn't 'ave been hanythink else."

"All—night—long!" whispered Jeannette, but she said it to her own trembling heart.

"Yes, and what do you think 'e done?" pursued Mrs. Ammer. "I were a-cleanin' up the theayter this afternoon and I 'eard as 'ow 'e'd chucked 'is job there and the chap as used to 'ave it is back again. And 'e was tellin' a yarn about 'ow Mr. Smith 'ad paid 'im to go on the sick list for a bit and let 'im take 'is place. 'E ain't been there more than about six weeks, you know. But there, you never know what to believe, do you? Lor, my dear, 'ow ill you look! It 'asn't been too much for you, 'as it?"

"No—no!" Yet Jeannette was gasping still, oddly, spasmodically. "Go on! Tell me everything!"

"Well," pursued Mrs. Ammer, warming to her subject all-unconsciously, "when 'e come in, 'e arst for a not bath. 'A not bath!' I says. 'This time o' day!' And that was 'ow it all come out. I see as 'ow 'e were a-shiverin' all over. 'Well, I'll get you a not tub,' I says, ('cos we ain't got no bath 'ere, you know) 'and then you take my advice'—that's what I says to 'im—'you take my advice and go to bed!' But do you think 'e'd go? No!" said Mrs. Ammer, tragically tossing the poker into the fender with a clatter that almost made Jeannette cry out. "'I've got to go out again,' 'e says. 'But I've got to get respectable first.' Well, I didn't say no more. 'Tain't no manner of use a-talkin' to men!" The large contempt of this reminded Jeannette irresistibly of Lady Varleigh. "I just let 'im alone, and 'e 'ad 'is bath, and if you'll believe me, 'e come downstairs after it lookin' just like a gentleman. I *were* surprised. And then 'e 'ad some breakfast

and out 'e went. I didn't see no more of 'im till about one o'clock, just as I were a-gettin' m'usband's dinner out of the hoven, in 'e come and dropped straight down into that chair over there, lookin' somethink awful. I were real scared at the sight of 'im. 'Sakes alive!' I says. 'Whatever is it?' And if you'll believe me, my dear, 'e smiled—yes, 'e smiled with 'is pore face all twisted up and 'is teeth a-chatterin'—'I'll be all right in a minute,' 'e says, and with that 'e fainted dead away. I never seen nothink like it," said Mrs. Ammer. "It fair give me a turn."

"What did you do?" said Jeannette tensely.

"Well, m'usband went for the doctor and got 'old of 'im pretty quick, luckily. And directly 'e see Mr. Smith, 'e said as it were a case for the 'orspital just as soon as 'e could get 'im there. Well, 'e give 'im somethink to bring 'im round, and then 'e went off to fetch a hambulance. And while 'e was a-waitin', Mr. Smith 'e pulled 'isself together, and 'e says, 'I want to write a note,' 'e says. And I fetched 'im pen and paper and 'e wrote in between the most hawful shiverin' fits as hever I did see. 'Ere's the note, my dear." Mrs. Ammer turned to the dresser. "It's for you, and I promised 'im faithful as 'ow I'd give it to you straightaway. But you weren't in when I called this afternoon, nor yet when I come back from the theayter, and I wouldn't leave it for fear of it gettin' lost. So I were just a-comin' out again to look for you when you got 'ere."

Mrs. Ammer handed her a travel-stained slip of paper with the words.

Jeannette's hands were shaking as she opened it. She controlled them with a desperate effort.

"My dear Jeannette," so ran the difficult scrawl, "I have managed to catch a chill and have got to go to the

hospital. I wish I could have stayed within reach of you. But will you do this one thing for me? Go and lodge with Mrs. Ammer till I come out. I have left some money in my dressing-table drawer. Please take what you need, even though it comes from me—for God's sake, Jeannette.

"Yours ever,

"Buck."

The heart-cry of those words was to echo and re-echo in Jeannette's own heart for many agonizing hours.

She looked up, her agitation conquered. "Where is the hospital?" she said.

"Oh, it ain't no distance, my dear," Mrs. Ammer assured her. "We'll walk round now if you like, though I'm afraid it wouldn't do much good. The doctor 'e said as it would take two or three days anyway."

"What did the doctor call it?" said Jeannette, though in her quivering soul she knew.

"'E said it was the pewmonia," said Mrs. Ammer.

"Ah!" said Jeannette.

She sat quite motionless for a moment or two; then she got to her feet.

"Mrs. Ammer," she said, "he wants me to stay here with you till he is better. May I?"

"My dear, and welcome!" said Mrs. Ammer. "'E told me that 'isself before 'e went. 'She's all alone,' that's what 'e said. 'You take care of 'er!' And I promised 'im as 'ow I would, you bein' willin'."

"Thank you," said Jeannette. "And now I would like to write him a note which I can leave at the hospital when I go to fetch my things."

"M'usband can go and get them," said Mrs. Ammer. "You set down again, my dear, and I'll get you the pen!"

So, a few minutes later, Jeannette sat and wrote her

note to Buck with the same pen with which he had written to her.

"My dear Buck," so her message ran, "I will do whatever you wish.

"Yours ever,

"JEANNETTE."

Looking up, she found Mrs. Ammer watching her with moist eyes. "I couldn't 'elp but know there was somethink between you two," she said. "I seen it."

"It doesn't matter," said Jeannette.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Ammer, with a tearful sniff. "Well, please God, 'e'll get well again."

"Please God, he will," said Jeannette, and her whole heart spoke in the words.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE COMING OF LADY VARLEIGH

THEY took the note to the hospital, and after some delay one of the ward-sisters came to speak to them.

"I'm afraid it's rather a serious case," she said cheerfully. "No one can see him, of course. A note? Well, I'm not sure. It depends; but it is not generally allowed."

"You can read it to him yourself," said Jeannette. "It is only to set his mind at rest that I have written it."

The sister gave her a quick glance as though the cultured tones puzzled her.

"It's 'is young lady," said Mrs. Ammer propitiatingly. "You couldn't refuse to let 'im 'ave a message from 'er!"

The sister took the note. Her kindly face showed sympathy. "I will see what can be done," she said. "Will you tell me your name?"

"My name is Jeannette Wyngold," said Jeannette.

"Oh!" said the sister.

She stared for a moment, then recovered herself.

"That will be all right, Miss Wyngold," she said. "Call again in the morning—about ten—and you shall hear how he is!"

"Thank you," said Jeannette very earnestly.

Then she went back with Mrs. Ammer to spend the night in the humble back-room in which Buck had lodged

for her sake, and to pray hungrily, desperately, with wrung tears, for his life.

She went again to the hospital in the morning, alone this time, and waited for an interminable hour for news. In the end the sister came to her, still wearing the official mask of cheerfulness, but with a subtle pity in her demeanour which Jeannette was swift to note.

"I am afraid he isn't very well to-day, Miss Wyngold," she said. "Rather a restless night, and some difficulty with his breathing. He is not allowed to talk at all, as naturally he has got to husband all his strength for the crisis."

"The crisis?" questioned Jeannette.

"Probably the day after to-morrow," came the practical reply.

"Then I can't see him?" said Jeannette.

"Not to-day," said the sister, kindly and firmly. "But I gave him your note, and he has got it under his pillow. Come again to-morrow!"

"Do you think he is going to pull through?" said Jeannette.

The official mask smiled upon her; the eyes behind the mask pitied.

"Rather a serious case, I am afraid," said the sister. "But perhaps I may have better news for you to-morrow."

And Jeannette went, broken-hearted.

It was the only word that could describe her in that moment. She knew—just as if the sister had told her so—that Buck's hold on life was slackening.

She went, too crushed for prayer, and walked back through the busy streets to her temporary home at Fifty-nine, Jigger Street, feeling broken in mind and body.

She saw nothing whatever of her surroundings as she drew near. All her soul was centred on the thought of

Buck—the faithful and despised—gasping out his life in a London hospital, because of what he had done for her —his magnificent devotion to her cause. The children who screamed and played in the gutter made no impression whatever upon her. She walked through them, stony-faced, instinct alone guiding her.

And so she came at length to Mrs. Ammer's door, and found a taxi standing outside, surrounded by a group of Jigger Street inhabitants. A mild wonder stirred within her at the sight, no more. She turned without a second glance to open the rickety gate.

And then it came—the most wonderful thing, she reflected afterwards, that had ever happened to her.

"My darling!" said a deep voice. "My precious one! You're not going to pass me by like this!"

She turned blindly. The taxi-door was open. She stumbled to it. She actually fell on to the feet of its occupant.

"Oh, is it you?" she sobbed. "Is it you? Thank God!"

"Of course it's me!" said Lady Varleigh, and gathered her up into stout arms of motherly tenderness. "I've come back to you, darling, because I couldn't bear it any longer."

She held Jeannette to her and cooed over her as though she had been a baby.

"Poor darling! Poor darling! What you've been through! And what a damnable place to find you in! Never mind! It's over now—I've come to take you away, —because it's no good, my Jeannette. I can't do without you. You've got to humour the old woman this time, for I'm too old to be disagreed with. Sir Jervis wrote and told me about you, and I've been fretting ever since. And you've got yourself into all the papers! I knew you'd get up to mischief once you were on your

own. Never mind, darling! Never mind! It's over now. And as soon as Sir Philip has done talking to the owner of this dreadful place, we'll go straight away and catch the next train to Dover. For I've promised him I'll go back. It's the only condition on which he'd let me come. There, let me look at you, Jeannette! It's the same Jeannette, isn't it? They haven't hurt my darling?"

With anxious solicitude she drew back a little to scan the girl's white face. Then:

"You're very thin, sweetheart. You're troubled! What is it?" she said.

And Jeannette—Jeannette the proud, the independent—crept back into her arms like a child that is afraid of the dark. "Oh, Lady Varleigh, it's Buck!" she whispered. "He's very ill—in hospital. It's pneumonia—and they think—he's going to die!"

"What—nonsense!" said Lady Varleigh. "Buck? Well, he may be stupid, but he isn't so stupid as that. They can think what they like. He isn't!"

That helped her. Jeannette laughed—a broken laugh—and was herself again.

"Dear Lady Varleigh! You may be right. But—I'm afraid he's very bad. I've promised him to stay here for the present."

"Splendid!" said Lady Varleigh. "But now I've come, I think he would approve of your changing your quarters. You're not married to him yet, I suppose?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Jeannette.

"Excellent!" said Lady Varleigh. "Then you needn't obey his lightest whim without thinking it over first. Dear child, how thin you are! *Nous allons changer tout cela!* Run in, darling! Run in and pack up! Wait! I will come too."

"But I can't go till I've seen Mrs. Ammer!" said Jean-

nette, still between tears and laughter, and a wonderful bright gleam of hope at her heart which Lady Varleigh had somehow managed to kindle.

"Mrs. who?" said Lady Varleigh. "Are there no aitches in this barren district?"

"Oh, plenty," said Jeannette. "But they grow in unusual places. No, don't get out, dear Lady Varleigh! I'll go in and send Sir Philip back to you. And then—if I may—I will put my things together and wait for Mrs. Ammer. Then, as soon as I have seen her, I will come to you."

"Is that a promise?" said Lady Varleigh.

"Of course—of course! Do you think I would ever dream of doing anything else? Oh, how good it is to see you again!"

Jeannette's arm clasped her again in an embrace which brought the tears to her friend's eyes.

"Well, darling," she said, "I must admit that I'm feeling better now than I have felt ever since I left you. Ah, here is Sir Philip at last! And who is that unshorn lump of humanity with him?"

"That is Mr. Ammer," said Jeannette. "But he is very shy, so I won't introduce him. Good-bye for the present! And oh, thank you a million times for coming back to me!"

"My blessed one!" said Lady Varleigh.

Sir Philip, red of face and raucous of voice, here came forward and wrung Jeannette's hand. "I hope you're not going to send us empty away this time," he said. "We've crossed Europe to fetch you, all because of my wife's insomnia."

"Philip! Don't be so tactless!" protested Lady Varleigh. "You know you haven't had an hour's peace any more than I have."

"Well, well!" said Sir Philip indulgently.

Mr. Ammer loafed uneasily in the background. He was plainly relieved when Jeannette finally parted with her fine friends and turned to enter his humble abode.

As for Jeannette, she went straight to the room that had been Buck's and in which his workman's dress still hung, and knelt beside the narrow bed, spreading her arms over the pillow on which his head had rested.

And there she prayed with a passionate intensity, as never in her life had she prayed before; and knew that her prayer was heard.

## CHAPTER XV

### IN GREAT WATERS

"My dear child, of course he will get well!" said Lady Varleigh. "The moment he sees you he will take a turn."

"But they won't let me see him!" said Jeannette.

"Leave that to me!" said Lady Varleigh.

Jeannette did so, for Lady Varleigh was in a mood that could not be gainsaid.

Lady Varleigh rang up the hospital without further delay, and held a dignified conversation with the matron; at the end of which she turned to Jeannette with triumph in her eyes.

"Yes, dear, you can see him this evening. The only thing is, you mustn't let him talk—at all. Don't forget that, Jeannette!"

"He is very ill?" said Jeannette.

"Yes, dear, desperately ill. But he won't die," said Lady Varleigh firmly, in the tone of one who had private information on that point. "Now you are going to be very sensible and have a solid meal before you go. After that, darling, remember, a great deal rests with you. I shall be helping from my end too. Be sure of that!"

"You always help," said Jeannette.

She did her utmost to be very sensible, as Lady Varleigh said, for somehow she felt that she was helping Buck thereby. But when the evening came, when she found herself once more in the vestibule of the great hospital, her heart began to fail her again. What would

she do with her life if Buck went out of it—Buck who till now had never counted? She tried to realize life without him, and failed utterly and completely. He who till now had been only the background had suddenly become the very centre and hub of existence. He mattered more than anything else in the whole world, and in some curious way she felt that he always had mattered, only she had not known it. Something had opened her eyes, something she did not understand—an unknown quantity that was terrible and yet sublime. And beside it everything else had become contemptibly small and unimportant. She felt, as she waited there, that she had never really lived before.

She had to wait for some time, but the sister came to her at last, still smiling, but more than usually restrained.

"I think he will like to see you," she said. "We have got him in the pneumonia room by himself. But I shouldn't let him talk if you can help it."

How was it that Jeannette gathered from this guarded information that in the official opinion it would make little difference to the final issue whether he talked or not?

She murmured something, she knew not what, and followed her guide.

She was perfectly steady now, with that steadiness which comes when the need is great. But she could not have denied the grim presence of terror in her soul. Just as surely as if the words had been spoken, she knew that they had given up hope.

She never afterwards remembered entering the room where Buck lay. It seemed to come at the end of long journeying through interminable passages and she felt as if she had been walking for hours when at last she stood beside his bed.

Her first impression was one of intense thankfulness that she had reached him, and then with a jerk her heart recoiled to the old deadly fear. He was lying propped almost upright by pillows, and his face was drawn and livid, utterly unfamiliar. His breathing was so rapid as to seem like a mere palpitation in the throat. His eyes were wide open and burning; they wandered ceaselessly about the room and she seemed to see in them the reflection of her own fear.

"He will see you in a minute," whispered the sister at her side.

And attracted by the sound they came direct to her and stared full at her. She saw his lips move, and bent to him.

"Buck, it's me! It's Jeannette!"

He continued to gaze at her, his look a mixture of incredulity and wondering recognition.

She stooped and took his hand. "It really is me, Buck. Don't try to speak! I'm here, and I'll stay as long as you want me."

For she knew instinctively that they would not try to send her away. She had been given the privileges which only the friends of the dying are allowed.

She saw his look change. The puzzled expression gave place to one of immense relief, and then like a light breaking over his face she saw his smile. Again he tried to speak, and his fingers closed on hers; but the next instant he began to cough with a short, spasmodic choking sound most painful to her. His hold upon her became a grip.

She slipped her arm behind him, and supported him while the paroxysm lasted, and a nurse on the other side of the bed gave her help. But when it was over, he was utterly exhausted and lay with closed eyes, so spent that each gasping breath seemed as if it must be his last.

The nurse gave him brandy, but he had such difficulty in swallowing, that she looked at Jeannette and shook her head.

It was then that a new force suddenly came to Jeannette—a power so strange and so irresistible that she herself was amazed at it.

She stretched an imperative hand across the bed. "Give it to me!" she said.

The nurse complied, and Jeannette held the cup unfalteringly to the discoloured lips.

"Buck!" she said, and her voice held sheer command. "This is for you to drink. Buck,—for my sake—you must drink it!"

What put those words into her mouth? She could not have said. But, speaking them, she knew that they had reached that inner consciousness of his being to which no mere persuasion from an outsider could ever have penetrated. He answered to that call. He roused himself, and with a supreme effort he swallowed the restorative almost drop by drop, so that the nurse on the other side of the bed uttered a muffled exclamation of surprise. Jeannette silenced her with a single darting glance from beneath her straight-drawn brows; and from that moment another factor entered into the struggle. It was no longer a fight between science and disease; it was a desperate hand-to-hand conflict between Love and Death.

There followed an interval of comparative peace in which the tortured breathing grew a little less acute. Jeannette stood motionless by the bedside. The nurse brought her a chair, but she would not sit down. There could be no rest for her in that fight. His eyes must see her instantly, without any searching, the moment they opened.

They did not open again for a long time, and she wondered if his strength were waning, if perhaps he

would sink into unconsciousness and be gone before any further effort could be made. She waited, with the restorative ready to her hand.

But after what seemed an almost endless interval his eyes opened and rested upon her. They did not wander any longer, but came to her and dwelt upon her with a look of complete contentment. He did not try to speak, but after a few seconds his hand moved and pointed to the chair. She sat down, and he smiled his satisfaction.

She saw he wanted news from her, and supplied it as simply as possible.

"Lady Varleigh has come back, and so I am not staying with Mrs. Ammer any longer, but at their hotel with them. I knew that would meet with your approval."

He looked momentarily surprised, and then she saw again that look of vast relief and knew that her words had set his mind at rest. It was evident that nothing mattered so long as she was safe, and the knowledge touched her very deeply.

But she went on very quietly and steadily. "You had my note, I know, and what I said in that I meant, so don't worry any more about me! It is you that matters now, and that's why I am here. I have come to take care of you, Buck, and I'm not going till you are better."

He smiled again at that, and his smile lifted the deathly look from his face. But for that terribly rapid breathing it made him seem almost normal for the moment. She leaned towards him and lightly patted his hand.

"So I hope you will be very good," she said, and her own smile was a quivering one in spite of her, "because I want you to get well quickly. Don't you think you might get a little sleep if you were to try?"

His eyes still dwelt upon her, and the smile still lin-

gered. Pantingly he spoke. "I will do—whatever you wish—Jeannette."

Then came the cough again—that short, difficult cough with its suffocating frequency—and when that was past the dreadful exhaustion, through which she waited each moment to hear his breathing cease.

She sat beside him, holding his hand, and it seemed to her that Death was very near. But every time her hope sank, it was renewed again by some influence of which she had no knowledge. She could not pray, yet deep in her spirit she knew that she was not forsaken. Though far out of her chosen course and drifting in great waters, she felt the Hand upon the helm.

Time passed, and there was little change, save that Buck had apparently sunk into a stupor from which he was too spent to rouse himself. Yet she had a feeling that he was conscious of her nearness and her touch, and she did not dare to move lest he would be distressed.

She lost all count of time, sitting there, crouched forward, watching. It was growing late when a doctor entered, and she knew it was on the nightly round.

She did not offer to move, nor did he ask her to do so, but went to the other side of the bed and remained there for some time, closely watching, with the nurse in attendance. Eventually, to her relief, he went away without disturbing Buck. The nurse accompanied him, and she was left alone.

Then it came to Jeannette—a definite call to prayer—and she slipped to her knees beside the bed. No words came to her, but she poured out her soul in the silence in a passion of entreaty that seemed to bear her to the very Throne of God.

Afterwards, when she came back to earth again, though utterly spent and weary, she was conscious of a great peace enfolding her and the man she loved. And it did

not matter any longer that they thought him sinking, believing that he would die in the night. For the fear was all gone from her heart, and in its place was a tremor of rejoicing, because she knew that her prayer had been heard.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PROBLEM

"But I told you he would!" said Lady Varleigh, drying her eyes with vigour. "Bless you, my dear lamb! And you call it a miracle? I call it just—the Will of God."

"So do I," said Jeannette. "But, oh, Lady Varleigh, it might have been His Will to—to——"

"Not a bit of it, darling! Not with you and me praying our very hardest as we were. It couldn't have happened. Can't you picture Him—I can!—turning from fashioning some wonderful new world—or insect,—and saying, 'What is it they are making such a fuss about? Let Us give it them at once and have a little peace!' And I think He smiled when He said it, Jeannette. For He loves His children to keep on asking till they get it."

Jeannette's eyes were full of tears. "I think He does," she said.

Lady Varleigh thrust her slippered feet further towards the fire. "This is so nice," she said comfortably. "To have you all to myself once more, my Jeannette, and to know I am not to lose you again! I wonder how soon we can start back to the sunny South."

"Oh, not yet!" said Jeannette. "At least—I can't. But you mustn't wait for me."

"Why not," said Lady Varleigh tranquilly. "Now that Buck is out of danger——"

"He might want me," said Jeannette.

"Darling, he has always wanted you, but surely that makes no difference! Buck well is a very different proposition from Buck ill, remember!"

"He isn't well yet," said Jeannette.

"Quite true, dear. But he will very soon approach the interesting stage when it would be sheer loss of dignity to hold yourself at his disposal any longer. You mustn't do it, Jeannette. Believe me, it doesn't answer. I am an old soldier, and I know. He'll say you're encouraging him if you do."

Jeannette's chin went up in the old proud way; but the next instant she laughed. "Well, that's just what I am doing," she said.

Lady Varleigh's black brows met and also went upwards. "You amaze me!" she said. "And I had such a charming Italian count all ready for you in his villa by the blue sea! I cultivated him solely for you, Jeannette."

"What a sad waste!" said Jeannette.

"Yes," agreed Lady Varleigh tragically. "And he'll say I've encouraged him now, and Sir Philip will have to call him out—or else divorce me—perhaps both!"

"Perhaps neither!" consoled Jeannette. "He may have got over it by this time. Let's hope he has!"

"They never do at this stage," sighed Lady Varleigh. "And some of them never get over it at all. Look at Sir Jervis!"

"He is rather exceptional," said Jeannette.

"Is he, dear? Are you quite sure of that?" Lady Varleigh's black eyes challenged her shrewdly.

Jeannette's eyes came to them in instant response. "He seems to me," she said deliberately, "to be a man who has always desired the unattainable, and, knowing himself beaten, to have tried to satisfy his craving with

the husks. He never has satisfied it in that way, and he never will. The great want remains."

"Oh, Jeannette, how wise you are!" Lady Varleigh's voice was deep and very tender. "And so you sacrificed yourself to save my little romance—that poor treasure of mine! Yes, I know all about it, darling. He wrote and explained it all. And let me tell you this! Only a woman in love would have done a thing like that."

"But I wasn't in love!" said Jeannette.

"I know," said Lady Varleigh indulgently. "You are one of those happy people who have never been attacked by the fell disease. Be thankful for it, darling, and clasp your freedom to you while you may! Only—when the great want comes, may the means to satisfy it be ready to your hand!" She laughed softly. "Jeannette! Jeannette! What are those secrets in your eyes?"

Jeannette stretched her hands to the fire and fixed her gaze upon it without answering.

After a few moments Lady Varleigh continued in a pensive tone. "Perhaps after all there is no urgent need to hurry back, for I have never felt better in my life, and I know poor Sir Philip wants to re-make his will—for the umptieth time. It is really becoming quite a habit with him. You see, the problem is, as we are both of us so refreshingly free from family ties, who to leave it all to. My own idea is to adopt some nice young couple, plant them at the old Hall, and—watch them grow."

"I thought the Hall was to be pulled down," said Jeannette.

"Yes, dear, so it was. But when it came to the point we found we couldn't do it. So I evolved this other plan instead. Don't you think it is rather a nice one?"

"Excellent," said Jeannette.

"I was sure you would. But there are complications.

As you know, dear, it was my original intention to leave all my worldly goods to you. But unfortunately circumstances have made that impossible. Sir Philip, on the other hand, has long wanted to make Buck his heir. But, as I say to him, if Buck never marries—and of course as you won't have him he never will—what is the good of doing that? It's a great problem, Jeannette, and I must say it has worried me considerably. Now if Buck were to marry and have children—that would be a very different thing. For to my way of thinking, darling, children are so much better than lovers, more amusing in every way—infinitely more precious. But that may be because I have had too many of the one and none at all of the other. What did you say, darling?"

"Nothing," said Jeannette.

"You smiled then! It does me good to see you smile. You see the difficulty, don't you, dear? Now if on the other hand you were to marry—some nice man, Jeannette—all my perplexities would be over. I should make your husband my heir on condition that he maintained you in absolute luxury and never allowed you to give away a penny."

At this point Jeannette looked up from the fire and laid a quiet hand on her friend's knee. "Dear Lady Varleigh," she said, "need we talk of these things—even in jest? I would rather—so much rather—take life as it comes and not fret about the future."

Lady Varleigh sighed with emphasis. "Quite, darling, quite! Very right and proper! But if some of us don't give the future a thought occasionally, it certainly won't be worth much when it comes. Do you know what Buck said when my husband offered to let him stay on at the Hall and make him his agent?"

"I know he refused," said Jeannette.

"Yes, darling. He refused in order to be at liberty

to stay near you. He sold the Hall in order to have money to spare for that very purpose, and money for you if you should be in need. He couldn't deny it when Sir Philip taxed him with it. He said—he frankly said—that so far as he was concerned that was the only thing that mattered. As to being Sir Philip's agent, well, he said that under certain circumstances there was nothing he would have liked better, but, as things were, it was out of the question. We know what he meant by that, Jeannette, don't we?"

"No doubt we can guess," said Jeannette.

"Yes, darling. We can guess. And for myself—" Lady Varleigh spoke with characteristic vigour—"I could never rest at night if I felt that I were standing between a man and his career—not to mention an inheritance into the bargain."

"I am sure you couldn't," said Jeannette.

"And the desire of his heart as well," threw in Lady Varleigh.

"That would be even worse," said Jeannette.

Lady Varleigh bent swiftly forward, looked her closely in the eyes, then took her face between her hands and fondly kissed it.

"God bless you, my pretty one!" she said.

They were still sitting before the fire in the pleasant accord of complete understanding when Sir Philip abruptly flung open the door and strode in upon them with the aggressive gait of an exasperated man.

"Oh, dear Jerusalem!" ejaculated Lady Varleigh, with pardonable petulance. "Why do you come into the room like that?"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" said Sir Philip, though not by any means in a tone of conciliation. "If you didn't sit with your head in the clouds so perpetually you wouldn't get so many shocks."

"Perhaps!" said Lady Varleigh. "It's only the earthworms who realize it though. Now sit down, my dear man, and tell us all about it!"

"Am I in the way?" suggested Jeannette.

"No—no! It's all your doing, Jeannette. You'd better stay." Irritably Sir Philip made reply.

"My prophetic soul!" said Lady Varleigh. "It's something to do with Buck!"

Jeannette started and half rose. "Is it? What is it?" she said quickly.

Sir Philip turned fully to her. "Well, he's gone. That's what it is," he said bluntly. "As you know, I was to ring up and make arrangements to transport him here to-morrow to convalesce and then to go South with us. Well, I rang up, and was informed that he got himself passed fit this morning—and he was dying only a week ago, mark you!—got himself passed fit and cleared out in a taxi-cab. Perhaps *you* know where he's gone to —the young fool—but he didn't take the hospital into his confidence, merely gave them a present for their funds and departed."

"How very wrong of him!" said Lady Varleigh, with her eyes upon Jeannette.

"Mad! Mad!" said Sir Philip, striding furiously to and fro. "Jeannette, where is he? Tell me where to find him and I'll bring him here if I have to assault him to do it!"

Jeannette was on her feet. Her face wore an odd look, half startled and half-amused.

"I will go and fetch him," she said.

"That's right," said Lady Varleigh, with warm appreciation. "You leave it to her, Philip! She'll bring him to his senses quicker than anyone. I predict that we shall all be on our way to the sunny South in a week from now."

"I've got to get my will made first," said Sir Philip.

"Of course," said Lady Varleigh soothingly. "And I mine. But the most expensive lawyer in the land couldn't take longer than a week, surely! Run along, Jeannette dear! Take a taxi and bring him back with you! We'll engage a room for him while you're gone."

"Yes, be quick about it!" said Sir Philip. "And tell him he's a double-dyed fool of the first degree!"

"Oh, of course she'll tell him that!" said Lady Varleigh.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING

"WELL, there now! Did you ever?" said Mrs. Ammer, in tones of warmest welcome. "Mr. Smith—'e's come back, and m'usband said as you wouldn't be long after. Come in and set down, my dear, and I'll fetch him down!"

"Don't!" said Jeannette. "Don't! Let me go up to him! I know the room."

Mrs. Ammer looked a little doubtful.

"Please let me!" urged Jeannette. "He is still ill, you know, and we don't want to fetch him up and downstairs more than we need. If he doesn't want me, I'll go straight away again, I promise."

"You know best, my dear," said Mrs. Ammer, swallowing her scruples. "Maybe, I'd better go and tell that there taxi-man to switch off the hengine!"

"I wish you would," said Jeannette.

She went up the narrow stairs as she had never ascended any before; it was like the swift flight of a bird. She reached the little landing and stopped outside the bedroom door.

Her heart was fluttering with a wild agitation that surely Buck had never till now managed to excite in her. She clasped her hands tightly over it to steady it.

Then—it was some seconds later—she knocked at the door.

"Come in!" said Buck.

She opened it and paused on the threshold. He was lying on the little bed, his back towards her, his face to the grey winter sky.

"That you, Mrs. Ammer?" he said. "I'm not wanting anything, thanks. I'm a bit tired still—thought I'd take a rest. I shall be all right in a day or two."

Somehow that nerved her—the pathos of it and the courage.

She entered and gently closed the door. She came to his side. "Buck!" she said.

He gave a great start and would have been up in a moment, but she stopped him, her hands on his shoulders.

"No, don't please! You're not fit. Why did you leave the hospital without letting me know?"

He subsided again upon the pillow, but his hands clasped and held hers as he did so. He uttered a faint laugh which sounded embarrassed.

"This is awfully decent of you, Jeannette," he said, his straight grey eyes lifted direct to hers. "I feel a frightful worm. What made you come up here like this and shock the proprieties of Jigger Street?"

"Don't be silly!" said Jeannette firmly. "I came here because I wanted to see you."

"How jolly!" said Buck. "Same 'ere, as Mrs. Ammer would say. Sit down, won't you? I think that chair is quite sound. Of course I ought to be kneeling at your feet after all you've done for me. And if I were quite sure that my knees would perform properly, I should be. But I'm afraid they are my weakest point just now!"

He laughed again with the words more naturally, and she realized that he was talking to help himself and her.

She sat down by his side, gently freeing her hands as she did so.

"I have come—for a particular purpose, Buck," she said. "I wonder if—you can guess what it is."

"Not medicine?" hazarded Buck. "They made me bring some away with me. I've got it here—filthy stuff!"

"No, not medicine," said Jeannette, accepting the reprieve. "Sir Philip and Lady Varleigh want to give you something better than that. They have set their hearts on taking you to the South of France."

"Me!" said Buck.

She nodded. "Yes. It would set you up after your illness. You—I don't think you realize how bad you have been."

"Don't I?" said Buck. He was silent a moment. Then: "Are you going too?" he asked.

"Yes," said Jeannette.

The smile still lingered in his eyes as he watched her. "It's awfully good of the Varleighs," he said.

"Yes, they are wonderful," said Jeannette.

"Are you sure I shouldn't be in the way?" asked Buck.

"Not in mine," said Jeannette.

"Thank you," said Buck with simplicity. "I could always potter round with old Sir Philip, couldn't I?"

"If you wanted to," said Jeannette.

He mused for a space. "Well, I certainly could go," he said at length. "I haven't got a job just now. I was only a stop-gap at the theatre, you know, and the other fellow is back again now."

"Yes, I know," said Jeannette. "You paid him for the job, didn't you?"

Buck made a slight movement. "Which job?" he said.

"The job at the theatre," said Jeannette.

Buck looked puzzled. "Aren't you thinking of someone else?" he said.

"No," said Jeannette.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you," said Buck. "I drew my pay like anyone else."

"And gave it to the other man," said Jeannette severely.

Buck put his hand to his head. "Which man?" he questioned.

Jeannette stiffened. "You're pretending!" she said.

"What?" said Buck.

She turned on him. "And doing it very badly too—much worse than usual even. And if you haven't got a job just now, it's your own fault—and no one else's. You've been offered a job—and a very good one—but—just because you couldn't have everything else you wanted—you turned it down."

She paused, rather breathless. Buck's eyes were upon her again, and their clear scrutiny was oddly disconcerting. She felt as if she had tried to scare a faithful dog who refused to take her seriously.

"But I couldn't be in two places at once, could I?" he said mildly, filling in the silence.

"You didn't need to be," she said, wondering why his amiable attitude failed to incense her.

"I needed to be near you," said Buck.

She spread out her hands. "And as nearly as possible killed yourself over it! Why? Why?"

"You know why," he said quietly.

She caught her breath and held it for a space. Were they at cross-purposes? Or did he really understand why she had come?

Something in his silence helped her, a something that was unaccountably sustaining and reassuring. She let her breath go, slowly and deeply.

"Buck!" she said.

"Don't go yet!" said Buck.

She laughed rather tremulously. "I'm not going,—at least not—not if you want me!"

"Of course I want you!" he said.

"Are you sure?" said Jeannette.

He stretched a hand to her. "Under any circumstances and on any conditions," he said.

She took the hand between her own. She was trembling a little but her voice was rigidly steady as she said, "Do you remember that you once made me an offer of marriage?"

He raised himself on his elbow. "The offer is still open," he said.

"On the same terms?" said Jeannette.

"The same terms," said Buck.

She bent a little over the hand she held, her eyes downcast. "Do you really think that I would—or could—come to you on those terms?" she said.

"Won't you?" said Buck. "Can't you?" And then, in a lower voice, "Jeannette, why not?"

She made a sharp movement, a blind gesture towards him. She pressed his hand suddenly and passionately to her heart. "Buck—Buck—you dear fool!" she said, and laughed a choking laugh. "Will you never understand?"

"Jeannette!" he said. "Jeannette!"

His feet were on the ground. He made as if he would rise. And then—perhaps it was weakness—he went down on his knees before her instead.

"Jeannette!" he said in a voice that shook. "Show me your eyes—your darling wild-bird eyes! Let me be quite—quite sure!"

She would not for a few burning seconds, then as his arm went round her, drawing her, very suddenly she yielded herself to him; she turned her face to his. Her eyes were full of tears, but they were shining as he had never seen them shine before.

"Is that the answer?" said Buck, under his breath. "Is that why you prayed by my bed that night?"

"This is the answer—to everything," said Jeannette, and gave her quivering lips to his.

. . . . . .

"Well it's a good thing as that there taxi-chap stopped the hengine," said Mrs. Ammer, some considerable time later. "It ud 'ave cost a pretty penny if 'e 'adn't."

"It probably will as it is," said Buck. "Never mind! I'll pay. We've been packing, Mrs. Ammer."

"What, hoff again?" said Mrs. Ammer. "Well, I'm blest!"

"Quite so," said Buck. "You are—by everyone concerned. I've put my week's rent and all arrears into this envelope, Mrs. Ammer, and there's a trifle over for little Arriet. And a thousand thanks for all you have done for me. I'm going to stay with some friends now, but we'll let you know the wedding-day. It'll probably be within the next week. And we hope you'll all come."

"But—but you ain't been called at church yet!" gasped Mrs. Ammer. "You can't get spliced as quick as that"

"Oh, I think we can," said Buck, with his ready smile. "We're going to try anyway. I've got a job waiting for me, so I can afford to pay. Won't you wish us luck?"

"Oh, not 'alf!" said Mrs. Ammer fervently. "Just the best of heverything to you both!"

"We've got it already," smiled Jeannette.

. . . . . .

That night Lady Varleigh drew her into her arms and held her very closely.

"Jeannette child," she said, "I once wanted everything in life for you—riches, honour, success—but God thought otherwise, and so He scrapped them all. Lately, I have only asked for one thing—just one thing for you—and that thing He has sent at last."

"The very best of all!" said Jeannette.

"Even so, darling. The Unknown Quantity which ranks above and beyond everything else in life. Hold fast to it, Jeannette, hold fast, and always remember that it is the most precious thing you have!"

She spoke with an earnestness that told of deep feeling, and Jeannette, clinging to her, made low and equally earnest reply.

"I shall remember."

"It doesn't come to everyone," said Lady Varleigh. "Thank God it has come to you! Oh, Jeannette, when I think how nearly you missed it!"

Jeannette's eyes, very clear and bright, looked up to hers. "I thank God for everything," she said, "as I never thought I could. And very, very specially—my own best friend—for you."

"Bless you, my dear!" said Lady Varleigh. "What nonsense you talk to be sure! Now hadn't you better go to bed and be sensible? We've got to buy your trousseau to-morrow."

THE END

# *THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION*

**Adventures of Jimmie Dale.** Frank L. Packard.
**Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.** A. Conan Doyle.
**Affair in Duplex 9B, The.** William Johnston.
**Affinities and Other Stories.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**After House, The.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**After Noon.** Susan Ertz.
**Alcatraz.** Max Brand.
**Amateur Gentleman.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Anne's House of Dreams.** L. M. Montgomery.
**Anne of the Island.** L. M. Montgomery.
**And They Lived Happily Ever After.** Meredith Nicholson.
**Are All Men Alike, and The Lost Titian.** Arthur Stringer.
**At the Foot of the Rainbow.** James B. Hendryx.
**Auction Block, The.** Rex Beach.
**Aw Hell!** Clarke Venable.

**Bab: a Sub-Deb.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**Bar-20.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Bar-20 Days.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Bar 20 Rides Again, The.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Bar-20 Three.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Barrier, The.** Rex Beach.
**Bars of Iron, The.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Bat Wing.** Sax Rohmer.
**Bellamy Trial, The.** Frances Noyes Hart.
**Beloved Traitor, The.** Frank L. Packard.
**Beloved Woman, The.** Kathleen Norris.
**Beltane the Smith.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Benson Murder Case, The.** S. S. Van Dine.
**Big Brother.** Rex Beach.
**Big Mogul, The.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Big Timber.** Bertrand W. Sinclair.
**Bill—The Sheik.** A. M. Williamson.
**Black Abbot, The.** Edgar Wallace.
**Black Bartlemy's Treasure.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Black Buttes.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Black Flemings, The.** Kathleen Norris.
**Black Oxen.** Gertrude Atherton.
**Blatchington Tangle, The.** G. D. H. & Margaret Cole.
**Blue Car Mystery, The.** Natalie Sumner Lincoln.
**Blue Castle, The.** L. M. Montgomery.
**Blue Hand.** Edgar Wallace.
**Blue Jay, The.** Max Brand.
**Bob, Son of Battle.** Alfred Ollivant.
**Box With Broken Seals.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.

# THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

**Brass.** Charles G. Norris.
**Bread.** Charles G. Norris.
**Breaking Point, The.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**Bright Shawl, The.** Joseph Hergesheimer.
**Bring Me His Ears.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Broad Highway, The.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Broken Waters.** Frank L. Packard.
**Bronze Hand, The.** Carolyn Wells.
**Brood of the Witch Queen.** Sax Rohmer.
**Brown Study, The.** Grace S. Richmond.
**Buck Peters, Ranchman.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Bush Rancher, The.** Harold Bindloss.
**Buster, The.** William Patterson White.
**Butterfly.** Kathleen Norris.

**Cabbages and Kings.** O. Henry.
**Callahans and the Murphys.** Kathleen Norris.
**Calling of Dan Matthews.** Harold Bell Wright.
**Cape Cod Stories.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Cap'n Dan's Daughter.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Cap'n Eri.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Cap'n Warren's Wards.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Cardigan.** Robert W. Chambers.
**Carnac's Folly.** Sir Gilbert Parker.
**Case and the Girl, The.** Randall Parrish.
**Case Book of Sherlock Holmes, The.** A. Conan Doyle.
**Cat's Eye, The.** R. Austin Freeman.
**Celestial City, The.** Baroness Orczy.
**Certain People of Importance.** Kathleen Norris.
**Cherry Square.** Grace S. Richmond.
**Child of the North.** Ridgwell Cullum.
**Child of the Wild.** Edison Marshall.
**Club of Masks, The.** Allen Upward.
**Cinema Murder, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Clouded Pearl, The.** Berta Ruck.
**Clue of the New Pin, The.** Edgar Wallace.
**Coming of Cassidy, The.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Coming of Cosgrove, The.** Laurie Y. Erskine.
**Comrades of Peril.** Randall Parrish.
**Conflict.** Clarence Budington Kelland.
**Conquest of Canaan, The.** Booth Tarkington.
**Constant Nymph, The.** Margaret Kennedy.
**Contraband.** Clarence Budington Kelland.
**Corsican Justice.** J. G. Sarasin.
**Cottonwood Gulch.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Court of Inquiry, A.** Grace S. Richmond.

## *THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION*

**Cross Trails.** Harold Bindloss.
**Crystal Cup, The.** Gertrude Atherton.
**Cup of Fury, The.** Rupert Hughes.
**Curious Quest, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Cytherea.** Joseph Hergesheimer.
**Cy Whittaker's Place.** Joseph C. Lincoln.

**Dan Barry's Daughter.** Max Brand.
**Dancing Star.** Berta Ruck.
**Danger.** Ernest Poole.
**Danger and Other Stories.** A. Conan Doyle.
**Daughter of the House, The.** Carolyn Wells.
**Deep in the Hearts of Men.** Mary E. Waller.
**Dead Ride Hard, The.** Louis Joseph Vance.
**Deep Seam, The.** Jack Bethea.
**Delight.** Mazo de la Roche, author of "Jalna."
**Depot Master, The.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Desert Healer.** E. M. Hull.
**Desire of His Life and Other Stories.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Destiny.** Rupert Hughes.
**Devil's Paw, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Devil of Pei-Ling, The.** Herbert Asbury.
**Devonshers, The.** Honore Willsie Morrow.
**Diamond Thieves, The.** Arthur Stringer.
**Door of Dread, The.** Arthur Stringer.
**Door with Seven Locks, The.** Edgar Wallace.
**Doors of the Night.** Frank L. Packard.
**Dope.** Sax Rohmer.
**Double Traitor, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Downey of the Mounted.** James B. Hendryx.
**Dr. Nye.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Dream Detective.** Sax Rohmer.

**Emily Climbs.** L. M. Montgomery.
**Emily of New Moon.** L. M. Montgomery.
**Empty Hands.** Arthur Stringer.
**Enchanted Canyon, The.** Honore Willsie.
**Enemies of Women.** Vicente Blasco Ibanez.
**Evil Shepherd, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Exile of the Lariat, The.** Honore Willsie.
**Extricating Obadiah.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Eyes of the World, The.** Harold Bell Wright.

**Face Cards.** Carolyn Wells.
**Faith of Our Fathers.** Dorothy Walworth Carman.
**Fair Harbor.** Joseph C. Lincoln.

**Feast of the Lanterns, The.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**Feathers Left Around.** Carolyn Wells.
**Fire Brain.** Max Brand.
**Fire Tongue.** Sax Rohmer.
**Flaming Jewel, The.** Robert W. Chambers.
**Flowing Gold.** Rex Beach.
**Forbidden Door, The.** Herman Landon.
**Forbidden Trail, The.** Honore Willsie.
**Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, The.** Vicente Blasco Ibanez.
**Four Million, The.** O. Henry.
**Foursquare.** Grace S. Richmond.
**Four Stragglers, The.** Frank L. Packard.
**Fourteenth Key, The.** Carolyn Wells.
**From Now On.** Frank L. Packard.
**Further Adventures of Jimmie Dale, The.** Frank L. Packard.
**Furthest Fury, The.** Carolyn Wells.

**Gabriel Samara, Peacemaker.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Galusha the Magnificent.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Gaspards of Pine Croft.** Ralph Connor.
**Gift of the Desert.** Randall Parrish.
**Glitter.** Katharine Brush.
**God's Country and the Woman.** James Oliver Curwood.
**Going Some.** Rex Beach.
**Gold Girl, The.** James B. Hendryx.
**Golden Beast, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Golden Ladder, The.** Major Rupert Hughes.
**Golden Road, The.** L. M. Montgomery.
**Golden Scorpion, The.** Sax Rohmer.
**Goose Woman, The.** Rex Beach.
**Greater Love Hath No Man.** Frank L. Packard.
**Great Impersonation, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Great Moment, The.** Elinor Glyn.
**Great Prince Shan, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Green Archer, The.** Edgar Wallace.
**Green Dolphin, The.** Sara Ware Bassett.
**Green Eyes of Bast, The.** Sax Rohmer.
**Green Goddess, The.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**Green Timber.** Harold Bindloss.
**Grey Face.** Sax Rohmer.
**Gun Brand, The.** James B. Hendryx.
**Gun Gospel.** W. D. Hoffman.

**Hairy Arm, The.** Edgar Wallace.
**Hand of Fu-Manchu, The.** Sax Rohmer.

**Hand of Peril, The.** Arthur Stringer.
**Harriet and the Piper.** Kathleen Norris.
**Harvey Garrard's Crime.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Hawkeye, The.** Herbert Quick.
**Head of the House of Coombe, The.** Frances Hodgson Burnett.
**Heart of Katie O'Doone, The.** Leroy Scott.
**Heart of the Desert.** Honore Willsie.
**Heart of the Hills, The.** John Fox, Jr.
**Heart of the Range, The.** William Patterson White.
**Heart of the Sunset.** Rex Beach.
**Helen of the Old House.** Harold Bell Wright.
**Her Mother's Daughter.** Nalbro Bartley.
**Her Pirate Partner.** Berta Ruck.
**Hidden Places, The.** Bertrand W. Sinclair.
**Hidden Trails.** William Patterson White.
**High Adventure, The.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Hildegarde.** Kathleen Norris.
**His Official Fiancee.** Berta Ruck.
**Honor of the Big Snows.** James Oliver Curwood.
**Hopalong Cassidy.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Hopalong Cassidy Returns.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Hopalong Cassidy's Protege.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Horseshoe Robinson.** John P. Kennedy.
**House of Adventure, The.** Warwick Deeping, author of "Sorrell and Son"
**House of Intrigue, The.** Arthur Stringer.
**Hunchback of Notre Dame.** Victor Hugo.
**Hustler Joe and Other Stories.** Eleanor H. Porter.

**Illiterate Digest, The.** Will Rogers.
**Immortal Girl, The.** Berta Ruck.
**Inn of the Hawk and Raven, The.** George Barr McCutcheon.
**In Another Girl's Shoes.** Berta Ruck.
**In a Shantung Garden.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**Indifference of Juliet, The.** Grace S. Richmond.
**Inevitable Millionaires, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu.** Sax Rohmer.
**Inverted Pyramid.** Bertrand Sinclair.
**Invisible Woman, The.** Herbert Quick.
**Iron Trail, The.** Rex Beach.
**Isle of Retribution, The.** Edison Marshall.
**It Happened in Peking.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**I Want To Be a Lady.** Maximilian Foster.

**Jacob's Ladder.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.

# *THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION*

**Jean of the Lazy A.** B. M. Bower.
**Jimmie Dale and the Phantom Clue.** Frank L. Packard.
**Johnny Nelson.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Judith of the Godless Valley.** Honore Willsie.

**Keeper of the Door, The.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Kent Knowles: Quahaug.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Keziah Coffin.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Kilmeny of the Orchard.** L. M. Montgomery.
**Kindling and Ashes.** George Barr McCutcheon.
**Kingdom of the Blind.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**King By Night, A.** Edgar Wallace.
**King of the Wilderness.** Albert Cooper Allen.
**Knave of Diamonds, The.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Kneel To The Prettiest.** Berta Ruck.
**Knights of the Desert.** W. D. Hoffman.

**Labels.** A. Hamilton Gibbs.
**Ladies of Lyndon, The.** Margaret Kennedy.
**Land of Forgotten Men.** Edison Marshall.
**Land of Mist, The.** A. Conan Doyle.
**Last Trail, The.** Zane Grey.
**Leap Year Girl, The.** Berta Ruck.
**Leave It to Psmith.** P. G. Wodehouse.
**Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President.** Will Rogers.
**Light That Failed, The.** Rudyard Kipling.
**Limping Sheriff, The.** Arthur Preston.
**Little Pardner.** Eleanor H. Porter.
**Little Red Foot, The.** Robert W. Chambers.
**Little Ships.** Kathleen Norris.
**Little White Hag, The.** Francis Beeding.
**Locked Book, The.** Frank L. Packard.
**Lone Hand, The.** Joseph B. Ames.
**Lone Wolf, The.** Louis Joseph Vance.
**Long Live the King.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**Loring Mystery, The.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Lost World, The.** A. Conan Doyle.
**Loudon from Laramie.** Joseph B. Ames.
**Luck of the Kid, The.** Ridgwell Cullum.
**Lucky in Love.** Berta Ruck.
**Lucretia Lombard.** Kathleen Norris.
**Lydia of the Pines.** Honore Willsie.
**Lynch Lawyers.** William Patterson White.

**Madame Claire.** Susan Ertz.

## *THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION*

**Major, The.** Ralph Connor.
**Man and Maid.** Elinor Glyn.
**Man from Bar-20, The.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Man from El Paso, The.** W. D. Hoffman.
**Man from Smiling Pass, The.** Eliot H. Robinson.
**Man They Couldn't Arrest, The.** Austin J. Small.
**Man They Hanged, The.** Robert W. Chambers.
**Mare Nostrum (Our Sea).** Vicente Blasco Ibanez.
**Martin Conisby's Vengeance.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Mary-'Gusta.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Master of Man.** Hall Caine.
**Master of the Microbe, The.** Robert W. Service.
**Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes.** A. Conan Doyle.
**Men Marooned.** George Marsh.
**Michael's Evil Deeds.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Mine With the Iron Door.** Harold Bell Wright.
**Mind of a Minx, The.** Berta Ruck.
**Miracle.** Clarence B. Kelland.
**Mischief Maker, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Miss Blake's Husband.** Elizabeth Jordan.
**Money, Love and Kate.** Eleanor H. Potter.
**Money Moon, The.** Jeffery Farnol.
**More Tish.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**Mr. and Mrs. Sen.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**Mr. Grex of Monte Carlo.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Mr. Pratt.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Mr. Pratt's Patients.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Mr. Wu.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**Mrs. Red Pepper.** Grace S. Richmond.
**My Best Girl.** Kathleen Norris.
**My Lady of the North.** Randall Parrish.
**My Lady of the South.** Randall Parrish.
**Mystery of the Sycamore.** Carolyn Wells.
**Mystery Road, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.

**Ne'er-Do-Well, The.** Rex Beach.
**Net, The.** Rex Beach.
**Night Hawk.** Arthur Stringer.
**Night Horseman, The.** Max Brand.
**Night Operator, The.** Frank L. Packard.
**Nina.** Susan Ertz.
**No. 17.** J. Jefferson Fairjeon.
**Nobody's Man.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**No Defence.** Gilbert Parker.
**North.** James B. Hendryx.

**Oak and Iron.** James B. Hendryx.
**Obstacle Race, The.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Odds, and Other Stories.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Old Home Town, The.** Rupert Hughes.
**Oliver October.** George Barr McCutcheon.
**On the Rustler Trail.** Robert Ames Bennet.
**Orphan, The.** Clarence E. Mulford.
**Owner of the Lazy D.** William Patterson White.

**Padlocked.** Rex Beach.
**Painted Ponies.** Alan Le May.
**Paradise Bend.** William Patterson White.
**Partners of the Tide.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Passer-By, The, and Other Stories.** Ethel M. Dell.
**Passionate Quest, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Patrol of the Sun Dance Trail, The.** Ralph Connor.
**Pawned.** Frank L. Packard.
**Pawns Count, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Pearl Thief, The.** Berta Ruck.
**Peregrine's Progress.** Jeffery Farnol.
**Peter Ruff and the Double Four.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Philopena.** Henry Kitchell Webster.
**Pine Creek Ranch.** Harold Bindloss.
**Poisoned Paradise, The.** Robert W. Service.
**Pollyanna; "The Glad Book." (Trade Mark.)** Eleanor H Porter.
**Pollyanna of the Orange Blossoms. (Trade Mark.)** Harrie Lummis Smith.
**Poor Man's Rock.** Bertrand W. Sinclair.
**Poor Wise Man, A.** Mary Roberts Rinehart.
**Portygee, The.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Possession.** Mazo de la Roche, author of "Jalna."
**Postmaster, The.** Joseph C. Lincoln.
**Power of the Glory, The.** Gilbert Parker.
**Prairie Flowers.** James B. Hendryx.
**Prairie Mother, The.** Arthur Stringer.
**Prairie Wife, The.** Arthur Stringer.
**Prillilgirl.** Carolyn Wells.
**Prodigal Son.** Hall Caine.
**Profiteers, The.** E. Phillips Oppenheim.
**Progressive Marriage.** Bonnie Busch.
**Promise, The.** J. B. Hendryx.
**Purple Mask, The.** Louise Jordan Miln.
**Purple Mist, The.** Gladys Edson Locke.

**Queer Judson.** Joseph C. Lincoln.